

QLD NEWS

Medical atlas maps links between mental disorders and cancer, heart attacks and strokes

A Queensland researcher's work to map the increased risk of cancer, stroke and heart attack facing those with mental disorders is a "wakeup call for the health sector".

Janelle Miles, Medical reporter, The Courier-Mail

 Subscriber only | April 30, 2020 8:58am

HAVING a mental health disorder greatly increases a person's chances of developing physical conditions such as cancer, heart disease and gut ailments, prompting a Queensland-based researcher to produce a "comprehensive atlas" of the risks to better inform doctors providing patient care.

Psychiatric researcher John McGrath, who divides his time between the Queensland Brain Institute and Denmark's Aarhus University, led a team of international scientists to draw attention to the fatal consequences of having a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia or post-traumatic stress disorder, beyond suicide.

Professor McGrath said people with psychiatric conditions died, on average, 10 years earlier for men and seven years earlier for women, than the general population.

He said suicide accounted for only a small proportion of the premature deaths.

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“People with mental disorders are dying much earlier than they should because often they’ve got treatable medical conditions,” Professor McGrath said.

He suggested lifestyle factors, weight gain linked to medications prescribed for some psychiatric conditions and failing to seek help as some of the reasons psychiatric patients were at increased risk of dying prematurely from medical conditions, such as cancer, heart attack or stroke.

“Genetic factors and some exposures related to stress and trauma increase your risk of not only mental disorders, such as PTSD, but also things like heart attacks,” Professor McGrath said.

He described the research, published in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine, as a “wake up call for the health sector”, highlighting the desperate need for better treatments for mental conditions.

“It would be really good if we had better treatments for mental disorders such that people don’t go on to the disability pension, that they don’t live below the poverty line and they can be active members of the community and use their skills,” Professor McGrath said.

“I see this as a bad report card for a whole range of issues. We should be better at treating these issues so that they don’t go on to get them and if they do go on to get them we should be better at treating them more assertively. We want more effective and safer treatments.”

Professor McGrath said all sectors of the health system needed to join forces to improve the health of people with mental disorders.

“The best way to reduce the premature mortality is for general practitioners, mental health clinicians and people with mental disorders to work more closely together in order to monitor the general health of people with mental disorders,” he said.

“For those of us with mental conditions, we need to take especially good care of our physical health, watch our weight, exercise, and when we see our GP, ask for checks of our general health, such as our blood pressure and lipid levels, not just the mental disorder.”

The researchers drew on comprehensive health data of millions of Danes, not available in other countries, for the study.

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