



## **PTSD AND ADDICTION – US EXPERT URGES AUSTRALIAN ACTION**

- EMBARGOED UNTIL 1600 AEDT THURSDAY 15 FEBRUARY 2007 –

A visiting US researcher has urged Australian health authorities to investigate alternative treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to its close links with alcohol and other drug dependence. Recent research conducted by Dr Sudie Back from the Medical University of South Carolina, USA also suggests that women may be particularly vulnerable to developing addiction in response to PTSD.

PTSD is a chronic, debilitating condition that some people develop after experiencing to extremely traumatic events such as rape, physical assault, child abuse, combat, or a serious injury/accident.

“If left untreated, PTSD can lead to impairment in many areas of one’s life, including physical, mental, and social well being. In particular, untreated PTSD is associated with a significant increase in risk for addiction” said Dr Back.

Dr Back who is a visiting professor at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW explains that “one reason for this strong link between PTSD and substance use is that people often try to ‘self medicate’ their PTSD symptoms by using alcohol or drugs. In order to help prevent addiction, it is critical for people with PTSD to receive treatment.”

Among women seeking treatment for addiction, up to 80% report a history of physical and/or sexual abuse. Women are also plagued by a phenomenon known as “telescoping.”

“What this means is that for women, the time from their first use of alcohol or drugs to the time when serious problems have developed for them is significantly shorter than it is for men,” explained Dr Back. “In part, this is due to biological differences in levels of gastric dehydrogenase, the enzyme responsible for metabolizing alcohol, and body composition.”

Despite fewer years of substance use and smaller quantities of substances consumed, women suffer more severe physical and psychological adverse consequences as a result. For example, women are twice as likely to develop cirrhosis of the liver, and suffer more severe lung damage and brain atrophy than men.

Australian research conducted by Dr Katherine Mills at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, shows that people who have alcohol or other drug problems are 6½ times more likely to have PTSD. Among individuals with alcohol dependence, it is estimated that as many as 70% may have PTSD at some point in their lifetime.

People with PTSD have a number of symptoms including unwanted thoughts about the event, nightmares or flashbacks, feeling “cut off” or detached from others, difficulty sleeping or concentrating, irritability, feeling “on guard” all the time, and avoidance of people, places or conversations that remind one of what happened.

“PTSD is a known risk factor for developing an addiction,” said Dr Back. “We need to do more to identify and offer treatment to people with PTSD early on so that the burden to these individuals, their families and loved ones, and society at large can be lessened.”

“Both substance use and PTSD are treatable conditions and no one should have to suffer from them unnecessarily.” says Dr. Back. “Through research and education we must do everything possible to help reach these individuals and ensure that proper treatments are available.”

In response to this significant problem, researchers in Australia and America are collaborating on a treatment designed to improve PTSD symptoms and substance use severity among men and women who have already developed both conditions. Dr Mills at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales in Sydney is currently conducting an investigation of this new treatment.

Preliminary studies of the treatment, called COPE, give us good reason to believe that it can lead to significant improvement in PTSD symptoms, substance use severity, depression, and occupational functioning. For more information about this new treatment for PTSD and addiction, contact Dr Mills on 02 9385 0253.

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