

June 18, 2002

Mental Health: For Depression, a Speedy Switch

By ERIC NAGOURNEY

Patients who will benefit from antidepressants may show telltale changes in the electrical activity of their brains weeks before they enjoy any relief from their symptoms, researchers have found.

The findings may eventually be useful to doctors treating some severely depressed patients and to researchers developing drugs to treat depression, said the lead author, Dr. Ian A. Cook of the University of California at Los Angeles.

The study, in the current issue of *Neuropsychopharmacology*, followed 51 people with severe depression. They were given Prozac, Effexor or a placebo, and then a series of measurements were made of the activities of their brains.

Although the two antidepressants work in different ways, the researchers found that they had similar and almost immediate effects on the prefrontal part of the brains in the patients who eventually felt better. The changes occurred after as few as two doses, and the greater the change, the greater the eventual benefit from the drug.

The findings may also be useful because doctors who give patients antidepressants usually have to wait weeks to find out if the drugs will have any effect.

The changes detected in this study were measured by EEG, and most practitioners are unlikely to adopt the procedure as part of their regular care. But doctors may use it when they want to try new drugs for severely depressed patients who fail to respond to a first antidepressant, to avoid wasting weeks, Dr. Cook said.

"If you're suffering from an inability to go to work or have suicidal thoughts, that's a long time to wait," he said.

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