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HEALTH

In the Canadian province of Ontario, fewer than half of women with abnormal Pap tests receive proper follow-up care

## Better Pap Smear Follow-Up Needed Among Lower-Income Women

and low-income women are less likely to be screened for cervical cancer than high-income women, a new study has found.

"Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable forms of cancer, yet in Ontario more than 1 million women have not been screened, and a disproportionate number of these women are living in lower-income communities," principal investigator Dr. Arlene Bierman, a physician at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, said in a news release from the hospital.

She and her colleagues found that less

than 50 percent of women who had a Pap test that detected a low-grade abnormality received appropriate follow-up care within the recommended time period, including either a repeat test or a medical procedure called a colposcopy, which examines a woman's cervix and vagina. The low rate of follow-up in these women is cause for concern because they tend to be at greatest risk for eventually developing cervical cancer, the study authors noted.

The study also found that the overall rate

of cervical cancer screening in Ontario was 69 percent, with screening rates of 61 percent for low-income women and 75 percent for high-income women.

"We need to make special efforts to reach women who are screened, but do not receive the necessary follow-up and may eventually fall through the cracks. To improve surveillance and treatment, we need a system that ensures all abnormal Pap tests are followed-up so that Ontario women can receive the best care possible," Bierman said in the news release.

The Project for an Ontario Women's Health Evidence-Based Report (POWER) study was a joint effort by St. Michael's Hospital and the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences.

■ St. Michael's Hospital, news release, Aug. 20, 2009

## Lack of Fear in Early Childhood Predicts Later Criminal Behavior

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The finding strengthens evidence that early brain dysfunction increases the risk of criminal offending.

"We are surprised at the findings," Dr. Gao added. "Although it has long been theorized that early fear conditioning deficits may lead to lack of conscience and, in turn, criminal behavior, no empirical studies had been conducted to test this hypothesis. Our findings constitute the first longitudinal study to support this hypothesis, and we are surprised that the relationship between poor conditioning and crime extends over 20 years."

The study was published online November 16 in the American Journal of Psychiatry.

The study population consisted of a birth cohort of 1795 children from Mauritius, born in 1969 and 1970. When study participants were 3 years of age, fear conditioning was assessed by electrodermal fear responses after presentation of 2 types of long auditory tones.

One tone was usually followed by a short, loud, unpleasant sound, and the other tone served as a control tone, which was deeper in pitch and had no unpleasant association. Skin conductance measures the nervous system's control over sweat secretion that is part of the body's fear response. Normal fear conditioning would result in greater skin responses to the conditioned tone than to the control tone.

By the age of 23 years, 137 study participants had convictions for serious crimes. These individuals were matched in a case-control design to nonoffender matched controls.

"A significant group-by-stimulus interaction indicated that the criminal offender group failed to show fear conditioning at age 3," the investigators write.

Impaired Amygdala?

How this reduced fear conditioning leads to future criminal behavior is uncertain, but the researchers suggest that poor fear conditioning predisposes individuals to crime because "individuals who lack fear are less likely to avoid situations, contexts, and events that are associated with future punishment — resulting in a lack of conscience."

"One of the brain areas involved in fear conditioning is amygdala. It is believed that amygdala is rarely susceptible to illness or injury; therefore, we hypothesize that some neurodevelopmental changes which happen in the first 3 years or even [in the] prenatal period may have caused

the amygdala impairments. Alternatively, fear conditioning deficits may be a result of a gene expression, which we're awaiting genetic studies to confirm."

Dr. Gao said one possible way of preventing criminal behavior is to enhance brain function at an early age. Other studies have indicated that early health enhancement programs among young children at ages 3 to 5 years that include better nutrition, more physical exercise, and cognitive stimulation can improve brain functioning and possibly prevent criminal behavior in adulthood.

According to Dr. Gao, these data raise several new questions, such as why some of the children with poor fear conditioning responses did not become criminals. "In other words, what are the protective factors that have prevented the at-risk individuals from committing crime?"

Important Contribution

Graeme Fairchild, PhD, who is in the Developmental Psychiatry Section at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, has studied fear conditioning in male adolescents with conduct disorder. He told Medscape Psychiatry that Dr. Gao's study represents an important contribution to our understanding of the development of antisocial behavior.

"Although the effect doesn't look large in magnitude, the demonstration that deficits in fear conditioning predict criminal outcomes in later life is novel and quite convincing," he said. Dr. Fairchild added that the criminal offender and comparison subject groups were also well matched on a number of important variables, such as social adversity.

"We already knew that adult psychopaths show impairments in fear conditioning, and our recent work in adolescents with conduct disorder revealed deficits in fear conditioning in a younger population," said Dr. Fairchild.

However, he added, up to now, it wasn't known whether problems with emotional learning caused antisocial behavior or were simply a consequence of having an antisocial or criminal lifestyle. For example, he said, drug abuse might damage the brain circuits involved in fear conditioning.

"By showing that fear conditioning impairments were present early in life in those who become criminal offenders, this study suggests that these problems are causally related to the development of antisocial or criminal behavior. It also shows that confounding factors associated with criminal behavior, such as drug use, do not appear to explain the differences between criminals and control subjects in fear conditioning," said Dr. Fairchild.

The study was supported by the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust. Dr. Gao and Dr. Fairchild have disclosed no relevant financial relationships.

Am J Psychiatry. Published online November 16, 2009. ■

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■ Michael Carabash is a Toronto business lawyer and the Founder/President of www.DynamicLawyers.com



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