

Mental illness mostly caused by life events not genetics, argue psychologists

Sarah Knapton, SCIENCE EDITOR, THE TELEGRAPH 28 March, 2016

Mental illness is largely caused by social crises such as unemployment or childhood abuse and too much money is spent researching genetic and biological factors, psychologists have warned.

Over the past decade, funding bodies like the Medical Research Council (MRC) have spent hundreds of millions on determining the biology of mental illness.

But while there has been some success in uncovering genes which make people more susceptible to various disorders, specialists say that the true causes of depression and anxiety are from life events and environment and research should be directed towards understanding the everyday triggers.



Life events rather than genetics are largely responsible for mental disorders, say psychologists CREDIT: ALAMY

Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Liverpool, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "Of course every single action, every emotion I've ever had involves the brain, so to have a piece of scientific research telling us that the brain is involved in responding emotionally to events doesn't really advance our understanding very much.

"And yet it detracts from the fact that when unemployment rates go up in a particular locality you get a measurable number of suicides. It detracts from the idea that trauma in childhood is a very very powerful predictor of serious problems like experiencing psychotic events in adult life. So of course the brain is involved and of course genes are involved, but not very much and an excessive focus on those issues takes us away from these very important social factors."



Unemployment and childhood trauma are to blame for many mental disorders CREDIT: ALAMY

Almost half of adults will suffer from a mental health condition at some stage in their life and more than a third of GP surgery consultations are due to mental problems.

One in four people have been diagnosed with some type of mental health problem, most commonly depression. In addition, 18 per cent said they had suffered from such illness, but never been diagnosed.

The UK now has the seventh highest prescribing rate for antidepressants in the Western world, separate figures show, with around four million Britons taking them each year - twice as many as a decade ago. Yet the MRC spends just three per cent of its research budget funding studies into mental illness, most of which goes towards genetics or neuroscience.

Prof Richard Bentall, also of Liverpool University added: "It's a tragedy actually. The UK Medical Research Council is one of the biggest funders of medical research in the UK, but if you look at the things that they fund, by far the majority are things like brain scanners or gene sequencing machines. Almost none of it is going towards understanding psychological mechanisms or social circumstances by which these problems develop. It is impossible to get funding to look at these kind of things."

The MRC said it was currently refreshing its strategic plan and was hoping to increase the amount of money allocated the mental health studies.

"I think it has been a longstanding debate, the issue of nature versus nurture and the MRC needs to make sure it funds the research which is going to have the most impact wherever it comes from," said Dr Rob Buckle, Head of Regenerative medicine at MRC.

"The issue here is that mental health is a very complex issue and the fundamental thing is to get a better understanding of the causes and progression of mental illness. We would like to spend more of our budget on mental health research and we totally accept this is interdisciplinary and involves neuroscientists and psychiatrists and social scientists and we do fund work around social impacts on mental health."

However other scientists argued that finding out the root causes of mental illness could prove beneficial to the greatest numbers of people.

Dr Jeff Barrett, who is working on uncovering the genes behind mental illness at the Wellcome Trust's Sanger Institute said: "If we understand the fundamental biology of the disease, it might be relevant in developing new ideas for therapies that are applicable to a wide range of patients. So if by doing studies like this we can strongly implicate one area of biology, it gives a new lead for drug companies to try to develop new therapies."