

Surfing the blues -- Internet questionnaire can accurately identify depression

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The Internet offers a valuable opportunity for the public to screen themselves for depression. This is the conclusion of a study published today in *BMC Psychiatry*, which demonstrates that a Chinese online tool for assessing depression is both accurate and reproducible, and may offer a way to identify the growing number of people suffering from depression.

Chao-Cheng Lin of the National Taiwan University Hospital, Yu-Chuan Li of the National Yang-Ming University, and other colleagues in Taiwan developed the Internet-based Self-assessment Program for Depression (ISP-D). Between September 2001 and January 2002 the team recruited 579 subjects via a popular mental health website. Volunteers were sent a follow-up email one to two weeks after completing the first questionnaire inviting them to re-sit the test, and those who completed the questionnaires were offered a psychiatrist's appointment to validate the diagnosis.

Results of the first assessment showed that 31% of participants had major depressive disorder, 7% a minor depressive disorder, 15% had some symptoms of depression that did not amount to a full diagnosis of depression (subsyndromal depressive symptoms) and 46% had no depression. Analysis of the retest results show excellent reproducibility for major depressive disorder. The reproducibility was lower for minor depressive disorder, which may be because minor depression is not a stable diagnosis. The psychiatrist's follow-up revealed that the diagnosis was correct for $\frac{3}{4}$ of those tested online.

Already between 1/5 and 2/5 of the world's population suffer from depression, but most remain undetected or go untreated, making it vital to provide more opportunities for diagnosis.

"The ISP-D provides a continuously available, inexpensive, and easily maintained depression screening method that is accessible to a large number of individuals across a broad geographic area," write the authors. This tool allows people to reliably assess depression in themselves on their own and in a short amount of time.

Citation: Web-based tools can be used reliably to detect patients with major depressive disorder and subsyndromal depressive symptoms, Chao-Cheng Lin, Ya-Mei Bai, Chia-Yih Liu, Mei-Chun Hsiao, Jen-Yeu Chen, Shih-Jen Tsai, Wen-Chen Ouyang, Chia-hsuan Wu and Yu-Chuan Li, *BMC Psychiatry* 2007, 7:12 (In press)

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