

Study provides better terminology for diagnosing restless legs syndrome

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(Medical Xpress) -- A study by Wits researchers has come to the aid of health practitioners who have previously had difficulty in diagnosing one of the most common neurological, but difficult to describe conditions, Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS).

This sleep disorder delays sleep onset, causes sleep disruption and fatigue. In addition, RLS increases the risk of cardiovascular disorders, depression and anxiety. As a result, diagnosis of this condition is very important but has been hampered by difficulties, for patients in describing the condition, and for doctors by a lack of a consensus regarding terms that indicate the condition.

The study by the [Brain Function](#) Research Group in the Wits School of Physiology, entitled Descriptors of [restless legs syndrome](#) sensations published in the latest edition of [Sleep Medicine](#) by researchers Samantha Kerr, Dr Warrick McKinon and Dr Alison Bentley was conducted to describe RLS sensations and to evaluate the accuracy of current diagnostic descriptors.

RLS, which the former Olympic athlete Zola Budd is known to suffer from, is characterised by an urge to move in response to unusual sensations in the legs primarily in the evenings. Patients experience difficulty describing their RLS sensations, resulting in a diverse range of descriptors which have not been fully characterised.

More than 40 participants took part in the study which involved

providing spontaneous descriptions of RLS sensations, completing a pain questionnaire and selecting descriptive words from a list of previously published RLS terms.

According to the study, the most spontaneous descriptors for RLS were “irritating”, “painful” and “urge to move”; while the prompted descriptors were “restless”, “uncomfortable” and “need to stretch”. The descriptive words most selected from the questionnaire were “tingling” and “jumping”.

The study found that the most frequently used words to describe RLS in the paper differ from the terminology used in the RLS diagnostic criteria; and the data emphasises the need for an international, large scale, multicultural study to determine the most accurate diagnostic descriptors to define RLS more clearly.

“The study was conducted to look at words describing what patients feel, because the approved terminology used until now in healthcare made it difficult for practitioners to diagnose the condition correctly. The vocabulary had to be expanded for the most common terms used by patients to be validated and recognised by healthcare practitioners,” says PhD student Kerr.

“The study’s results are beneficial two-fold: it provides doctors and the like with a list of words more likely used by patients to be diagnosed correctly; and provides [patients](#) with an extensive list to select from if they struggle to describe their [sensations](#),” she says.

Provided by Wits University

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