

Common anesthetic procedure dramatically improves well being of veterans with PTSD

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A single application of a common anesthetic procedure could be the answer to alleviating anxiety, depression and psychological pain in those suffering from chronic, extreme post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In a study presented at the Anesthesiology 2014 annual meeting, researchers followed 12 patients with PTSD who had undergone a simple anesthetic procedure called a stellate ganglion block (SGB). This common procedure involves injecting a small amount of local anesthesia into the base of the neck. SGB is traditionally used to treat a variety of conditions, from pain syndromes to sleep disorders.

"While it doesn't cure the problem, we found that SGB appears to be a fast-acting and effective long-term treatment for chronic, extreme PTSD in veterans," said Michael T. Alkire, M.D., staff anesthesiologist at the Long Beach VA Healthcare System in California. "These improvements far outlasted what we would expect from SGB, which is usually used as a temporary nerve block and typically lasts three to five hours."

In the study, the patients each were given one SGB and followed closely with structured interviews and other psychological tests for six months after treatment. The positive effects of the SGB were evident often within minutes and resulted in significant improvement of scores for the Clinician Administered PTSD Score, or CAPS, the test used to measure the severity of PTSD.

Symptoms improved over time, and after one month, CAPS scores

registered normal to mild PTSD levels for most of the patients. Positive effects were still seen at three months, but began fading and were generally gone by six months. Overall, 75 percent of the participants reported significant improvement of their PTSD symptoms after the SGB.

Data from the study further suggested that SGB might also be an effective initial treatment for depression and anxiety disorders.

"Further work is needed to identify which patients might respond best to this treatment as well as understand the mechanisms involved that produce such a rapid, dramatic and long-term change in psychological health for some patients," said Dr. Alkire, who also is a professor of anesthesiology at the University of California-Irvine.

Provided by American Society of Anesthesiologists

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