

Malaysian tribe schizophrenia research revived

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A 20-year research project into schizophrenia among Malaysian tribal Iban people has been resurrected thanks to a University of Adelaide visiting researcher.

Professor Cecilia Essau, the only Iban-speaking academic psychologist, visiting from the University of Roehampton, was invited to complete the work of late Professor Robert Barrett, a prominent University of Adelaide researcher.

Between 1986 and 2006, Professor Barrett investigated the indicators of [schizophrenia](#) in Iban people. He lived among them in remote farms in Sarawak, Malaysia, and collected medical records and first-hand video accounts of Iban people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia before he suddenly passed away in 2007.

Speaking in the lead up to Mental Health Week (4-10 October), Professor Essau says she has made some fascinating discoveries about the unique community and how they manage [mental health issues](#).

"There is no word for 'schizophrenia' among the Iban people, therefore it is important to understand how the patients and their families talk about the illness," says Professor Essau.

"The main health issues they talk about are physical illnesses such as headaches, insomnia, fever and red eyes; aggressive behaviour; wandering around and restlessness; and silly behaviour.

"Patients talk about their various health and behavioural concerns, without realising that they may be suffering from a mental health condition," she says.

Professor Essau says culture plays a key role in how [mental health](#) conditions manifest in individuals and this is no more obvious than in the Iban people.

"Iban people live in 'long houses' which are home to whole families, including extended families. Immediate family members often share one room and the whole family comes together in a common room," says Professor Essau.

"They also live in the jungle and are surrounded by animals. And I believe it is these surroundings that lead many of those suffering from schizophrenia to have powerful hallucinations involving animals. These hallucinations are so strong they have, at times, led people to harm themselves and others," she says.

Professor Essau says these findings could make a significant contribution to academic understanding of schizophrenia in general.

"This has been a very rewarding project to work on because I have been able to learn more about my own culture," says Professor Essau.

"Our findings so far suggest that the manifestation of schizophrenic symptoms is shaped by the belief system and traditions of the culture in which the person lives.

"However, there is still so much more to discover from this data, which could make a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex nature of schizophrenia," she says.

Professor Essau and her research collaborator, Professor Anna Chur-Hansen, Head of the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide, will be preparing an academic paper on her findings.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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