European researchers set out priorities for dealing with problem internet use

October 8 2018

European Union funded researchers have launched the first international network to identify and understand problems associated with Internet use, such as gambling, pornography, bullying, excessive social media use. The Manifesto for a European Research Network into Problematic Usage of the Internet is published today in the peer-reviewed journal, *European Neuropsychopharmacology*.

The European Problematic Use of the Internet (EU-PUI) Research Network, which has to date been awarded €520,000 funding from the EU's COST programme (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), has agreed priorities for the study of problems associated with Internet use, what causes these problems, and how society can best deal with them. Identification of these priorities allows robust evidence-based proposals to be developed to feed into the next major round of EU funding, the €100bn Horizon Europe project.

Most Internet use is harmless, but recently significant concerns have grown over how Internet use might affect public health, especially mental health, and wellbeing4. The World Health Organisation has recognised Problematic Use of the Internet (PUI) since 2014, and it is about to include the new diagnosis of Gaming Disorder in the forthcoming revised International Classification of Mental Disorders (ICD-11), to be released shortly. Nevertheless, research on PUI has been fragmented and mainly at a national level, meaning that it is difficult to understand the international picture, or to work with a big enough group of patients to develop meaningful comparisons. To address this, the

COST programme has funded an expanding EU-PUI network, currently including 123 researchers from 38 countries. Plans for the network originated in the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology's Obsessive- Compulsive and Related Disorders Network, and the International College of Obsessive Compulsive Spectrum Disorders, and extends to include non-EU experts from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines.

The Network's Chair, Consultant Psychiatrist, Professor Naomi Fineberg (University of Hertfordshire), said: "This network includes the best researchers in the field, and the network will drive the PUI research agenda for the foreseeable future. Problematic Use of the Internet is a serious issue. Just about everyone uses the Internet, but much information on problem use is still lacking. Research has often been confined to individual countries, or problematic behaviours such as Internet gaming. So we don't know the real scale of the problem, what causes problematic use, or whether different cultures are more prone to problematic use than others.

These proposals are aimed at allowing researchers' to identify what we know and what we don't know. For example, it may be that cultural or family factors affect the extent to which people develop problems, but that needs research to determine.

Understanding the biological, psychological and social processes underlying problematic usage of the Internet stands to improve prevention and treatment strategies. Ultimately, we hope to be able to identify those most at risk from the Internet before the problem takes hold, and to develop effective interventions that reduce its harms both at an individual and public health level.

These are questions which need to be answered internationally. The internet is international, and many of the problems associated with it are

international, meaning that any solutions need to be viewed in a global perspective. We need standard methods so we can make meaningful comparisons.

There's no doubt that some of the mental health problems we are looking at appear rather like addiction, such as on-line gambling or gaming. Some tend towards the OCD end of the spectrum, like compulsive social-media checking. But we will need more than just psychiatrists and psychologists to help solve these problems, so we need to bring together a range of experts, such as neuroscientists, geneticists, child and adult psychiatrists, those with the lived experience of these problems and policy—makers, in the decisions we make about the Internet.

We need to remember that the Internet is not a passive medium; we know that many programmes or platforms earn their money by keeping people involved and by encouraging continued participation; and they may need to be regulated—not just from a commercial viewpoint, but also from a public health perspective5".

The team has identified 9 main areas of research, including such things as what PUI really is, how we measure it, how it affects health, are there genetic or social factors, and others.

1. What is problematic use of the internet?

2. How do we measure problem use, especially in different cultures and age groups?

3. How does problem use affect health and quality of life?

4. What long-terms studies do we need to show if the problems change over time?

5. How can we make it easier to recognise problem use?

6. What does genetics and personality tell us?

7. Do different cultures, family influences or design features of websites and applications impact on problem use?

8. How can we develop and test preventative interventions and treatments?

9. Can we develop biomarkers?

Naomi Fineberg continued, "We now need to begin to discuss the priorities set out in this paper, both with scientists and the public. We begin with a meeting in Barcelona on 10th October, which is also World Mental Health Day, just after the ECNP Congress, where we will begin to take evidence from the public".

Commenting Professor David Nutt (Imperial College, London) said: "As the internet takes up larger and larger parts of our life it is important to prepare for possible negative consequences. This manifesto is a significant step in this direction as it sets out a research programme run by top experts from many European and other countries that will monitor and provide potential solutions to such emergent adverse effects". Professor Nutt is not involved in this work.

Citation: European researchers set out priorities for dealing with problem internet use (2018, October 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-european-priorities-problem-internet.html