Revived UCI Sleep Center Focuses on Mental Issues

HEALTHCARE: Seeks more home tests, UCI sites

by PETER J. BRANNAN

Sleep is providing a window into our health, particularly psychiatric problems, according to Dr. Ruth Benca, a world-renowned expert on sleep.

“If someone has a sleep problem, it’s more likely there are some psychiatric issues than any other medical problems,” Benca said.

Benca, who is chair of the Psychiatry & Human Behavior School of Medicine at the University of California-Irvine in 2018 restated the UCI sleep center.

She’s designed a new, 3,600-square-foot facility in Newport Beach, which is in the recently built Newport Heights Medical Campus along Birch Street, and has recruited doctors from a variety of fields, such as Dr. Kevin Im, who won a 2014 national award for a sleep study, Dr. Rami Khayat, the center’s medical director and expert on the effects of sleep apnea on cardiovascular diseases, and Dr. Behrouz Jalari, an expert in pulmonology.

“We’ve built this beautiful facility and have an all-star group of physicians,” Benca said.

The center now has five physicians and is open five days a week with eight beds. She’s aiming for this clinic to extend to seven nights a week and then to open more sites and labs throughout UCI Health clinics, and to also provide more home testing. At least 20% of the U.S. population has a significant sleep disorder.

“Sleep cuts across every medical specialty,” Benca said. “Inadequate sleep or sleep disorders causes a whole range of health risks.”

The Study of Sleep

UCI previously had a sleep center that closed in 2016 after more than 30 years following the departure of the program’s director and not enough patients to pay for the program.

That Center for Sleep Medicine, one of the first in the nation to receive accreditation by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, treated sleep apnea, narcolepsy and restless leg syndrome.

During a tour of the revived UCI Health Sleep Medicine Center, Benca showed off one of the eight rooms reserved for patients to stay overnight.

The patients who spend the night in those rooms are connected by a series of wires hooked to various parts of the body. Sometimes, patients wear a swimming-like cap with up to 256 electrodes.

At a nearby control room, doctors, nurses and others monitor the sleep patterns, looking for signs like apnea, rapid eye movement or excessive sleep. One monitor showed the shadow-like image of a person lying in bed at 9:30 p.m. the day of the visit.

ONE EXTRAORDINARY HEALTH SYSTEM

One name. One family. Providence in Southern California has thousands of primary care and specialty physicians to choose from at award-winning hospitals that provide the highest quality of care.

ORANGE COUNTY
Hoag | Mission | St. Joseph | St. Jude

APPLE VALLEY
St. Mary

LOS ANGELES COUNTY
Holy Cross | Little Company of Mary | Saint John’s
Saint Joseph | Tarzana

Find a doctor today at ChooseProvidence.org
UCI Sleep
from page 20

on because a lot of disorders look similar,” she said. “If we can identify early, we can provide treatment that will make long-term progress much better.”

“We’re using sleep as a window on the brain to understand psychiatric disorders.”

Lives Sleep
After growing up in a Chicago suburb, Benea earned an undergraduate degree from Harvard University and then an MD and a Ph.D. in pathology from the University of Chicago. During her residency in psychiatry at that university, she became fascinated by the role of sleep.

“It’s a third of our lives and we tend to ignore it,” she said. “Inadequate sleep or sleep disorders cause a whole range of health risks.”

She worked with pioneers in the field, such as the late Dr. Christian Gillen of the University of California-San Diego. Benea has served as principal investigator for many research studies funded by agencies including the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense. She has served as a key member of the Sleep Research Society and on the board of directors of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

She went to the University of Wisconsin, where she developed that school’s sleep center. She arrived at UCI in 2016.

“My career is trying to understand the relationship between sleep and psychiatric disorders.”

Sleep Misunderstanding
It’s not just the public, but the medical profession itself doesn’t understand the connection between sleeping and other problems. She’s trying to encourage doctors to pay close attention to patients who discuss sleep issues.

“Sleep problems are often a tip of the iceberg,” she said. “People are much more comfortable talking about their sleep problems than they are about psychiatric symptoms, which is taboo. Unfortunately, psychiatrists and other healthcare providers don’t pay enough attention to sleep.”

For example, studies have shown that insomnia is “highly predictive” of people who are likely to develop eating disorders and who commit suicide. Some sleep studies have omitted people with suicidal indications because a death could ruin the study, she said.

“The popular belief among healthcare providers is that giving sleeping pills to suicidal people because they’ll get more depressed or commit suicide. We actually found that when these patients are carefully monitored, treating their insomnia helps them become less suicidal more quickly.”

Dr. Sleep’s Tips for Gamers, Executives, Jet Lag, Apnea

Dr. Ruth Benea has news for the alpha-executives, lawyers and investors who don’t think they need seven hours of sleep nightly.

“If night after night, you only get 5 or 6 hours of sleep, you’ll get progressively impaired although you’ll feel you’re getting used to it,” she said. “Your brain doesn’t function as well when you’re chronically deprived. You might not be aware of it.”

“Your judgment becomes impaired. You cannot judge risk well. You’re more likely to engage in dangerous activities, like driving when you shouldn’t or raising risky ventures.”

She examined executives who have significant stress problems with alcohol and stimulants and found it would often be linked to the loss of sleep.

“There’s this mushy thing that sleep is for success,” Benea said.

Rising early, like say 4 a.m., is fine if seven hours of sleep is achieved, she said.

She recognizes that sometimes executives must pull all-nighters.

She urges them to not go more than two nights in a row deprivéd of sleep, saying it’s possible to “catch up on sleep.”

Sport of Gaming?
Are video games a sport? Benea says—there’s no consensus for activity and causing adolescents to become “sleep-deprived couch potatoes.”

“They see up all night and they are not moving. I worry about that.”

“Both sleep and lack of fitness have similar impacts on our physiology in terms of affecting inflammations, brain functions, moods, causing problems with glucose, regulations, leading to type 2 diabetes.”

Jet Lag Tips
For outward travel, shift waking time and bedtime earlier by 1 hour per day for 3 days prior to departure; use bright light early in the morning to advance the circadian rhythm and avoid light exposure late in the day.

For westward travel, shift bedtime and waking time later for several days prior to travel; use bright light in the evening or during the first part of the night to delay the circadian rhythm and avoid light exposure in the morning.

Consider use of low-dose melatonin (1.5-5 mg) at the anticipated bedtime in the destination.

In flight, avoid alcohol and caffeine; try to sleep.

Upon arrival, adjust to the schedule in the new time zone by resuming awake during the daytime and following the new mealtimes.

Apnea
Sneeze loudly? Feel tired during the day? Wake up with headaches in the morning? All are signs of sleep apnea.

If it isn’t treated, apnea can lead to heart disease and Alzheimer’s, she said.

CPAP machine, which forces air into the lungs, are still the “gold standard” for effective and safe treatment and are improving, she said.

Wake Up
She doesn’t give advice on which type of bed to pick, saying people have different needs. She likes apps such as Fhound that monitor sleep.

Sleeping in an instantaneous process, so she advises that before falling asleep, wind down for an hour in a ritual way such as reading. Late evening use of alcohol, coffee and even exercise will cause you to wake up in the middle of the night.

“We think we’ll go, go, go and then shut off,” she said. “It takes a while for the brain to shut down.”

Walking up isn’t an instantaneous process either.

“It takes a good half hour for your brain to boot up in the morning.” —Peter J. Brown