

Revived UCI Sleep Center Focuses on Mental Issues

HEALTHCARE: Seeks more home tests, UCI sites

By PETER J. BRENNAN

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 psychiatry 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 restarted the UCI sleep center.

She's designed a new, 6,000-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 Jafari, 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 expand 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."



Sleep cap with electrodes

The Study of Sleep

UCI previously had a sleep center that closed in 2010 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 these 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 a.m. the day of the visit.

UCI Health Sleep Medicine Center

- **FOUNDED:** 2018
- **DIRECTOR:** Dr. Ruth Benca
- **BUSINESS:** center studying brain during sleep for signs of mental disorders
- **DOCTORS:** five
- **NOTABLE:** award-winning physicians, new facilities, more services

"This person is still sleeping from the night," Benca said.

This is a difference from other sleep centers that sometimes will rouse a patient at 5 a.m. and boot them out of bed, Benca said. She prefers to let the patients sleep as long as they need to find their true patterns.

The center conducts more than standard tests, such as using infrared technology to measure oxygen saturation in the brain. Dr. Anjalee Gallon, a doctor from **Children's Hospital** who studies pediatric sleep disorders, often spends a night at the facility studying a child with neurology disorders.

While physical health problems are often easier to diagnose because they involve relatively simple things like blood tests for diabetes, mental problems are more difficult to identify, Benca said.

In the past decade, scientists are beginning to understand that certain disorders exhibit patterns in different parts of the brain. For example, certain brain signals may point to a higher probability of schizophrenia, which she called "the most debilitating and deadly disorder in psychiatry."

"One of the problems in child psychiatry is that it's very difficult to make diagnosis early

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

"We're using sleep as a window on the brain to understand psychiatric disorders."

Likes Sleep

After growing up in a Chicago suburb, Benca 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 causes 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**. Benca 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 president 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 that doesn't understand the connection between sleeping and other problems. She's trying to encourage doctors to pay close



UCI team: Khayat (far left) and Benca (far right). Sleep is 'a third of our lives and we tend to ignore it,' Benca says

attention to patients who discuss sleep issues.

"Sleep problems are often the 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 don't give 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 Benca 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 as well. You're more likely to engage in dangerous activities, like driving when you shouldn't or making risky ventures."

She's examined executives who have significant abuse problems with alcohol and stimulants and found it would often be linked to lack of sleep.

"There's this macho thing that sleep is for sissies," Benca 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 deprived of sleep, saying it's possible to "catch up on sleep."

Sport of Gaming?

Are video games a sport? Benca says no—there's no cardiovascular activity and causing adolescents to become "sleep-deprived couch potatoes."

"They are up all night and they are not moving. I worry about that."

"Both sleep and lack of fitness have similar impact 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 eastward 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 (0.5–5 mg) at the anticipated bedtime in the destination.

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

■ Upon arrival, adapt to the schedule in the new time zone by remaining awake during the daytime and following the new meal-times.

Apnea

Snore 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 machines, which force 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 **Fitbit** that monitor sleep.

Sleep isn't an instantaneous process, so she advises that before falling asleep, wind down for an hour in a restful 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."

Waking up isn't an instantaneous process either.

"It takes a good half hour for your brain to boot up in the morning."

—Peter J. Brenman

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