

Science Near Breakthrough On Schizophrenia

A unique attack on schizophrenia is giving form to a barometer able to forecast stormy mental weather.

University of Michigan Prof. Sarnoff Mednick, leader of a 15-to-20-year study being conducted in Denmark, reports that certain measurable responses to special tests "may be precursors of a variety of psychiatric breakdowns."

SCHIZOPHRENIA is characterized by avoidance of reality. Victims learn the behavior to escape stress, to which they are extremely sensitive.

There is no known cure for the illness. Mednick's twin goals now are the identification of likely schizophrenics and the prevention of the disease in those persons.

Only successful prevention, he believes, will point the way to finding the cause.

"If a certain drug or a certain type of substitute mothering experience proved to be of

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SOUR CREAM SALAD DRESSING
1 cup sour cream
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons vinegar
1 teaspoon prepared mustard
1 tablespoon sugar
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper

Whip the sour cream until fluffy. Mix the remaining ingredients. Add gradually to the sour cream, beating constantly, until dressing is thoroughly blended. Chill. This dressing contains about 8 calories per tablespoon.

dramatic benefit in preventing mental breakdown, this would certainly point the way to researchers," he says.

"When we know the causes, how difficult will be the problems of diagnosis, prevention, treating or caring for, and rehabilitation? Not at all!"

PERHAPS SOMEDAY, the professor hopes, a child will be given a battery of tests with each routine physical examination. If the results show a predisposition toward schizophrenia or some other mental illness, he may be given a prescription which will in effect vaccinate him against it.

Mednick has been conducting his experiment through an institute he founded and directs, the Psychological Institute, Kommunehospitalet, in Copenhagen.

For the past six years he and Dr. Finn Schulzinger, a Danish psychiatrist, have been studying 207 children who were originally or are currently "normal" but have a risk for mental illness, especially schizophrenia.

"They have mothers who are chemically and severely schizophrenic. On the basis of earlier studies, we can estimate that 50 per cent of them will become seriously mentally deviant. About 15 per cent will become schizophrenic. We intend to follow them until they break down."

THE PSYCHOLOGIST HOPES "to be able to look back and see how those who became schizophrenic differed in childhood from those who did not. If there are some measures related to factors predisposing to schizophrenia, then we will be able to devise a battery of tests that will effectively pre-identify children who have an extremely high risk of becoming schizophrenic."

Twenty children in the experimental group have already become mentally ill, eight of them have been tentatively diagnosed as schizophrenics.

By matching these children with those in the high-risk group who are developing normally, Mednick has begun zoning in on predictors of coming trouble.

TESTS TAKEN before the 20 became ill have been compared with tests of those who have remained healthy. Mednick has found that three tests may indicate impending mental illness.

First, the 20 mentally ill lost their mothers to the psychiatric hospital exceptionally early.

Second, they are easily excitable by things which would not excite a normal person.

such as sunlight or a certain sound or the sight of an everyday object. But they recover quickly from their excitement.

Third, they exhibit distinctive disturbances in word association tasks.

In Mednick's study, each of the 207 children was matched with a "control group child" for age, education, sex, family background, and the like. The control children represent the general population, which has much less susceptibility to mental illness. Estimates of schizophrenia in the population run from one to two out of every hundred people.

A SIMILAR STUDY recently disclosed a number of early predictors of heart disease. "Although this sort of study is

far more difficult in the field of psychology, it is also more imperative," Mednick believes.

About half of the hospital beds in the United States are occupied by mental patients, and about half of them are schizophrenics.

"Schizophrenia is the most serious and least understood form of mental illness," Mednick says. "It is the world's greatest health problem, because it attacks its victims in their teens and frequently destroys productive life."

In a related study at the Danish Institute, Drs. Seymour Kety and David Rosenthal of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health are investigating the genetics of schizophrenia. Evidence so far indicates that heredity and environment both play

roles in predisposing one to schizophrenia.

CONCERN OVER the lack of progress in the search for the causes and cures of mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, prompted Mednick to try utilizing the techniques of medical research in approaching the problem.

The psychologist first attempted his study in Michigan, but the United States lacks the centralized medical records necessary for following a large study group over a long time.

Grants from the National Association for Mental Health Foundation and the schizophrenia research program of the 30rd Degree Scottish Rite, a Masonic order, enabled Mednick to set up a foundation in

Denmark. DENMARK HAS the advantage of being a smaller country with a less transient population and centralized medical files on each citizen.

Now the project is already beginning to move into experiments aimed at prevention.

"We are now planning to open several nursery schools to take in children with a high risk of mental illness. These children will be two and three years of age."

The researchers intend to study these youngsters as high-risk population and identify "premonitory" characteristics, just as they are now doing with the group of 207 who were between nine and 20 when the study began.

of our current results to begin

highly controlled factorially designed preventive measures. Among the preventives being planned are drugs to control autonomic functioning. We are hunting for some factor which can substantially reduce the incidence of mental illness," he said.

"The mayor of Copenhagen has already agreed to finance the actual nursery school expenses. We must pay only direct research costs."

Data will continue flow into the institute for years and Mednick hopes even more sensitive barometers than the three already found will be evolved.

If the success of the first six years is indicative, the study could be the biggest advance against mental illness in a decade.

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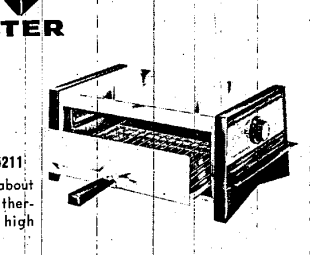
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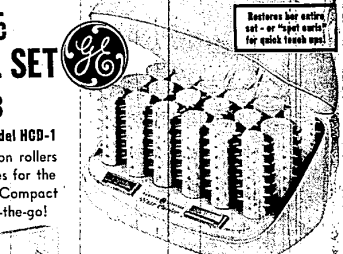
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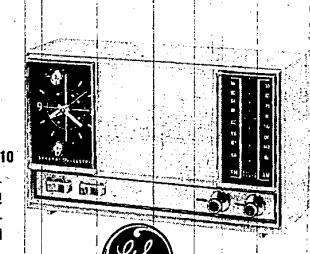
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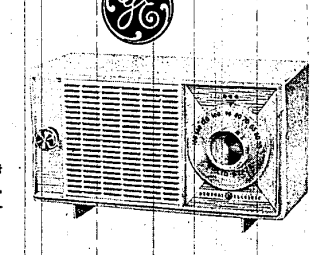
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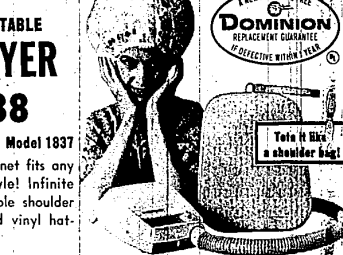
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