IMPULSIVITY IS TRAIT FEATURE IN ADOLESCENT BIPOLAR DISORDER

By Andrew Czyzewski

Impulsivity is a trait-based feature of adolescent bipolar disorder and thus a core feature of the illness, study results have confirmed.

Patients showed significantly greater levels of impulsivity than controls during both manic and euthymic phases, suggesting that impulsivity is not a simply passing state of the disorder, nor of adolescence itself.

Although heightened impulsivity is a characteristic feature of mania in adults with bipolar disorder, it has also been demonstrated in euthymic individuals, suggesting it is a trait, rather than state feature.

"However, little work has focused on impulsivity in adolescent bipolar disorder and thus, it is not clear whether impulsivity is a trait feature of the adolescent epoch," say Hilary Blumberg (Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut, USA) and colleagues in the Acta Neuropsychiatrica.

The researchers therefore assessed 23 adolescents with bipolar disorder and 23 mentally healthy controls using the self-report measure of impulsivity, the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS).

Total score on the BIS is the sum of three subscales: attentional impulsivity (inability to focus or concentrate), motor impulsivity (acting on the spur of the moment), and non-planning impulsivity (lack of sense of future).

Blumberg and team found that patients with bipolar disorder as a group showed significantly higher BIS total scores than controls at 74.2 versus 61.7, respectively, out of maximum possible score of 112.

Crucially, acute and euthymic bipolar disorder patients both showed significantly elevated BIS scores relative to controls at 77.0 and 72.7, respectively (versus 61.7).

The effect was particularly pronounced for the attentional subscale of impulsivity among both subgroups, as was non-planning among acute patients

In secondary analyses, adolescents with bipolar disorder characterized by rapid-cycling and chronic mood symptoms had significantly higher total and motor subscale BIS scores than adolescents with bipolar disorder without these course features.

"To our knowledge, this is the first study to show trait impulsiveness in adolescents with bipolar disorder using the BIS," Blumberg et al comment, adding: "Assessment of structural brain differences associated with BIS scores will further aid in elucidating mechanisms underlying the development of impulsivity in the disorder."