

# THE VISN 5 MIRECC MATTERS

An Electronic Publication of the VA Capitol Health Care Network  
(VISN 5) Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center

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## MIRECC PUBLICATIONS

Publications by MIRECC investigators can be found in a variety of prominent journals. Below are summaries of two recent publications.

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### Overlooking the Obvious: A Meta-analytic Comparison of Digit Symbol Coding Task and Other Cognitive Measures in Schizophrenia

*Submitted by Dwight Dickinson, PhD*

Meta-analysis is a statistical technique that allows researchers to summarize quantitatively the results of numerous studies in a particular area. MIRECC investigators Dwight Dickinson, PhD, and James Gold, PhD, with the help of Mary Beth Ramsey, BS, of the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, used this method to explore cognitive performance deficits in people with schizophrenia. A particular focus of this analysis was a group of very simple measures of information-processing speed, known as digit symbol coding tasks. The five-minute digit symbol coding task, reliable and easy to administer, taps an information processing inefficiency that is a central feature of the schizophrenia cognitive deficit and deserves systematic investigation. This analysis compared the magnitude of the schizophrenia impairment on coding tasks to impairments on other traditional neuropsychological instruments that have received greater research attention. Data were drawn from 37 studies with a total of 1,961 schizophrenia patients and 1,444 comparison subjects. The digit symbol effect

was significantly larger than effects for widely-used measures of episodic memory, executive functioning, and working memory. The investigators examined whether moderator variables, such as illness chronicity or medication, affected the findings, but such variables had little impact on the digit symbol effect. A comparison with previous meta-analyses suggested that current results were representative of the broader literature. Further, subsidiary analysis of data from relatives of schizophrenia patients also suggested prominent coding task impairments in this group.

This entire article, "Overlooking the Obvious: A Meta-analytic Comparison of Digit Symbol Coding Task and Other Cognitive Measures in Schizophrenia" can be found in the Archives of General Psychiatry, Volume 64, May 2007, [archgenpsychiatry.com](http://archgenpsychiatry.com).

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### Psychiatrists and Primary Caring

*Submitted by Lisa Dixon, MD, MPH*

Medical problems are common among patients seen in psychiatric practice. But there is not a consistent understanding of best practices for psychiatrists when they address these medical issues or assume primary care roles. What is the responsibility of the psychiatrist, and how can the responsibilities be fulfilled? This article addresses these concerns and concludes that psychiatrists can play an important part in delivering better care by attending to medical issues when treating patients.

This article, "Best Practices: Psychiatrists and Primary Caring: What Are Our Boundaries of Responsibility?", by MIRECC investigator Lisa Dixon, MD, was published in *Psychiatric Services*, Vol. 58, May 2007, [ps.psychiatryonline.org](http://ps.psychiatryonline.org).

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## **PSYCHOLOGY INTERNS LEAD RECOVERY GROUPS AT BALTIMORE PHP**

*Submitted by Alicia Lucksted, PhD*

Baltimore VA Partial Hospital Program (PHP) clinician Neil Weissman, PsyD, has been offering a recovery-oriented group to PHP veterans for several years. In 2005, he applied for and received a grant award from the MIRECC Small Grant Program which enabled him to enlist Psychology interns to help lead the groups. Dr. Weissman noted, "The award made it possible to offer (the group) more consistently and to more veterans. It also added a training component."

The groups are based on Boston University's "Recovery Workbooks." The interactive workbook format includes topics such as: cultivating a recovery orientation in managing one's mental illness, values clarification, personal goal planning, and coping skills. Three Psychology interns have led the group under Dr. Weissman's supervision. Melissa Nidecker, MA, has been one of the interns running the groups recently. She observed, "PHP's goals are to help the person figure out where they want to go next, what's important, and how to get there, and I see this group helping them frame it and

then work toward their goals". In her time with the group, Melissa has focused on the modules related to connectedness, i.e., taking care of one's self and one's relationships, including those relating to family, friends, community, and employment.

Dr. Weissman noted that the MIRECC Small Grant award will continue to have an effect well beyond the one-year award. The materials purchased with the grant funds will be used in the years to come, and the PHP has integrated the group into its ongoing program of services for veterans, and ongoing training offered to Psychology interns.

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## **PRESENT YOUR CASE**

VAMHCS clinicians - do you have a complex case involving second generation antipsychotics (SGA)? You are encouraged to bring them to the monthly SGA Consultation Seminar (see Upcoming Events for the details). Presentations are informal - just show up (or call in) and talk!

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## **GOOD-BYE AND THANKS**

Ashley Greer, MA, was a MIRECC Research Assistant at the Perry Point VAMC, and worked as a study therapist for the "Behavioral Treatment of Drug Abuse in SPMI Patients" and "MOVE!" studies. He has transferred within the VA to the Health Improvement Program (HIP). We wish him the best of luck in his new role.

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## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

### **Monthly SGA Consultation Seminar**

First Thursday of every month:  
July 5, 2007  
August 2, 2007

1:00 - 2:00 PM  
MIRECC conference room, BVA (6A-168)  
or PPVA VTel conference room, Bldg 364  
or call 800-767-1750, code 79846

There has been increasing concern, both within and outside of the VA, about the metabolic side effects of second generation antipsychotic medications (SGAs). VAMHCS clinicians are encouraged to bring their difficult or complicated SGA cases to this seminar for consultation and advice. Anyone can present a case or just ask questions in this informal setting, so please join us as we learn from the consultants and from each other. The consultants are **Robert Buchanan, MD**, from the MIRECC Psychopharmacology Clinic and Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, and **Julie Kreyenbuhl, PhD, PharmD** from the MIRECC.

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### **Recovery-Oriented Small Grants Program Application Deadline**

September 1, 2007

The VISN 5 MIRECC offers a small grant mechanism to fund recovery-oriented clinical and educational innovations in response to the VA's Action Agenda to transform VA mental health services to a recovery model. This program especially encourages (but is not limited to) proposals such as: creating, adopting, or launching new recovery-oriented clinical, self-help, or related projects (or expanding existing ones to reach more veterans), new programs to educate staff, veterans, and/or family members of veterans about mental health recovery models, or specific recovery-oriented services/programs. Please see the article in this newsletter for an example of an innovative program that was funded by one of these grants.

For more information, or to receive an application, please contact Alicia Lucksted, PhD, MIRECC Recovery Coordinator, at [Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov](mailto:Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov), 410-605-7451 or 410-706-3244.

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### **NATIONAL MIRECC CONFERENCE**

#### **Transforming VHA Mental Health Care: Promoting Recovery and Integrated Care**

A comprehensive mental health conference sponsored by the MIRECCs and Best Practices in Mental Health

July 17-20, 2007  
Hilton Alexandria Mark Center  
Alexandria, VA

This conference will focus on the diverse clinical, research and educational initiatives related to VHA's Mental Health Strategic Plan, and how the initiatives can be best implemented and monitored in their networks, local medical centers and the Veteran Readjustment Centers. In addition, the conference will focus on increasing recovery oriented services, integrating care, promoting a national model for suicide risk identification and prevention, and increasing accountability for the effective utilization of mental health enhancement funding. The conference will enhance the promotion of family psycho-education

models and increased utilization of peer-to-peer support services. Finally, the conference will foster collaboration among researchers, clinicians and educators, thus increasing the opportunities for new VA research while enhancing opportunities for psychiatry and psychology fellows.

For more information, visit [www.mirecc.va.gov/conference-2007.asp](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/conference-2007.asp)

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### **Schizophrenia and Other Mental Illnesses: Involving the Family, Improving Care**

This one hour, three-part (20 minutes each) DVD program highlights the importance of including families in the treatment of patients with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. This program is highly recommended for families, patients, clinicians, policy makers and the general public. For a copy, contact Fran Broomall at [fran.broomall@va.gov](mailto:fran.broomall@va.gov) or 410-605-7000, x 4740.

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<http://www.va.gov/VISN5mirecc>