Schoolkids’ troubled sleep

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“There seems to be a point where for those who get insomnia, it isn’t transient; it’s going to continue.”

Dr Gradinars said that the results were in line with studies conducted in America that suggest chronic teenage insomnia has a biological trigger.

“It seems that around the onset of puberty, there is a delay in circadian rhythm, meaning that teenagers get insufficient sleep,” he said.

“They take a long time to get to sleep, and then sleep for only five or six hours before they have to get up to go to school.”

Honours psychology student Grace Terrill investigated the effects of insomnia symptoms on short-term memory performance using a series of internet-based memory tests.

Dr Gradinars said that despite that children with insomnia complained of memory problems, testing revealed no relationship between reported insomnia symptoms and levels of performance in memory tasks.

“Sometimes there is a gap between what the children perceive and what they are actually doing during the day,” he said.

Nonetheless, Dr Gradinars said persistent sleep problems in children need to be taken seriously, with children reporting a range of effects ranging from lethargy and lack of motivation to actually falling asleep in class. Dr Gradinars said anecdotal reports from teachers confirmed the existence of many of these problems in the classroom.

Dr Gradinars recently set up the Child and Adolescent Sleep Clinic in the School of Psychology at Flinders to assist children who have disturbed sleeping patterns due to insomnia.

“We’re trying to provide a service that will improve their sleep and therefore improve their feelings during the day.”

The clinic uses a cognitive-behavioral approach in attempting to resolve sleep problems.

“We use a range of techniques: we do education about sleep, and look at their range of behaviors before they go to bed, while they are in bed, and when they get up.

“In terms of cognitive treatment, we focus on their thoughts and feelings that might occur while they are in bed. A lot of these kids are taking a couple of hours to fall asleep, and they are thinking a whole range of things that are leading to anxiety, depressed moods, frustration and anger.”

Dr Gradinars said there is often a circular aspect to insomnia - people become anxious about their ability to sleep, thereby making it more difficult to go to sleep and thus providing “evidence” for their belief that getting to sleep is outside their control.

“We attempt to get them to think differently about their situation - we show them that they can be in control by changing their behaviours and changing their sleep,” he said.

“We show them that the ‘evidence’ can be different.”

People interested in the services of the clinic can make enquiries on (08) 8201 2324 or 8201 2694. The course of seven sessions costs $70.