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Population in Need of Better Sleep

By Nan Myers

“For a price, everyone wants to help us sleep.” So said Nirav Patel, M.B.,B.S., assistant professor of clinical medicine in Penn’s Division of Sleep Medicine. He spoke at a recent symposium on “Population Sleep,” sponsored by Penn’s Center for Sleep and Respiratory Neurobiology. Examples are plentiful: drugs like Lunesta (“A great tomorrow starts tonight”), even

cular disease, obesity, depression, and increased mortality. It also goes without saying – fatigue.”

There are many reasons that people of all ages don’t sleep well. Most presenters agreed that our driven society plays a part – hectic schedules, shift work, disruptive noise, the always-available Internet, and round-the-clock television.

Patel and his team are conducting research in West Philadelphia to be able to tailor messages about the importance of sleep and to create interventions. “We have to let people know in a way they will understand.” In another study, Patel’s group will look at individual households to understand generational differences in the attitudes and perceptions among

A theme of the symposium:
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a good old Serta mattress. As Patel put it, “A good night’s sleep is an overlooked pillar of healthy living. It is a crucial health behavior that is biologically driven, but undoubtedly socially constructed.”

Madison Avenue *knows* that insufficient sleep is a problem. Experts in the field agree that most adults need seven to nine hours of sleep to be fully rested. So why do so many fail to get a good night’s sleep regularly? That was one of the questions posed at the symposium, which included sleep researchers, physicians, nurses, public health officials, social workers, and others. The main message was that insufficient sleep, although a widespread problem, is not well recognized among the public, the medical community, or the business community.

“We have to put sleep deprivation on the same level as smoking in the minds of the public,” said Allan Pack, M.B.,Ch.B., Ph.D., director of the sponsoring center.

According to Wayne H. Giles, M.D., from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “insufficient sleep is linked to such problems as diabetes, cardiovas-

Always connected means always stimulated. Stress can be a major factor.

Lauren Hale, Ph.D., associate professor of preventive medicine at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, takes a less obvious approach, looking at household environments. For example, how does sharing a bedroom, especially among people who live in lower-economic urban environments, affect sleep habits? Hale presented recent data showing that if mothers have poor bedtime routines, the behavior may trickle down to their children; in turn, they don’t learn good bedtime routines and can begin a lifetime cycle of poor sleep.

“Sleep patterns and sleep disorders vary by race and ethnicity in the United States,” Hale reported. “The relationships tend to be tied to socioeconomic factors such as education, unemployment, neighborhood, and obesity, and probably begin early in life. As a result, these racial and ethnic differences in sleep patterns may contribute to disparities in educational attainment, economic productivity, and health.”

their members. “We might interview a 40-year-old with poor health habits. How does his lifestyle affect his sleep and the sleep of the people who live with him – his parent and his child?”

Patel also discussed the popularity of over-the-counter sleep aids. “These products are being promoted as a cure for sleep issues.” Although some drugs may help with insomnia, “we don’t know their long-term effect.” At Penn, a psychologist is available to work with people “who feel they must have a sleeping pill and who don’t have any underlying psychological or medical problem. The psychologist helps patients to restructure their sleep behavior.”

“We have so much more to learn,” said Giles of the CDC. “For instance, if we treat a person’s sleep apnea, will it affect their diabetes?” Or, as Allan Pack asked, “Can you transform someone who sleeps five hours a night into someone who sleeps seven hours a night and also improve their health?”

Such questions need answers, and there’s really no time to sleep on it. ♥