

Technique discovered to help with schizophrenia

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Melbourne researchers have moved closer to unlocking the secret of why people with schizophrenia hear voices. Using sophisticated brain imaging techniques, researchers can track which parts of the brain are active when people hear voices. The technology is enabling them to give people coping skills to deal with the auditory hallucinations, with remarkable success. Most patients with schizophrenia hear voices, often insulting or provoking them to violence. But little has been known about how or why it occurs.

The director of the Mental Health Research Institute, Professor David Copolov, says scientists have found that during hallucinations, the brain cells involved with hearing are actually activated, making the voices appear real. "So people aren't imagining these voices, the brain is actually giving them a signal that these voices are present, which is why they are so real and so disturbing to people," he said. Patient Tim McKay hears voices, but through assertiveness therapy he had learnt how to control them and live a normal life. "If I hadn't had those coping skills I wouldn't have been able to achieve anything," he said. "I've got a very high level of quality of life that I wouldn't have had with just medication." Scientists at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital are working on a new treatment - low level magnetic stimulation. It is hoped this treatment may quieten the voices. During the treatment, known as TMS, small electrical currents stimulate the part of the brain involved with hallucinations.

Dr Colleen Loo, Prince of Wales Hospital study head, says patients remain awake during the treatment, which is pain-free. "We have some people where it's made a lot of difference," she said. "After 10 sessions in two weeks it's reduced their hallucinations by 50 per cent." Researchers now want to study the treatment in a larger group of patients with schizophrenia to further establish its effectiveness.