How to spot the signs of bipolar disorder and diagnose it early

Delays to diagnosis can lead people with bipolar to reach crisis point, but mental health nurses in general practice can help spot warning signs.

People with bipolar wait for an average of 9.5 years to get a diagnosis, according to the charity Bipolar UK. Waiting for a diagnosis can be distressing and the risk of suicide is high during this time, affecting more than 39% for those who wait between five and ten years for a diagnosis from the time they report their initial symptoms.

Early diagnosis is vital because ‘a delayed diagnosis of bipolar often means years of living with untreated, often debilitating symptoms, which can disrupt education, work, and social and family life’, says Bipolar UK.

While bipolar can only be diagnosed by a psychiatrist, nurses can play a role in identifying the potential signs of bipolar and helping to ensure people are referred to appropriate specialist services.

A recent study, which identified a number of early warning signs, and a growing interest in biomarkers for mood disorders could mean an earlier diagnosis for people with bipolar.

Georgina Callard, mental health nurse at Abbey House Medical Practice, Daventry, Northamptonshire, says mental health nurses working in general practice should have ‘a good understanding of bipolar’ and can take a thorough history, conduct assessments, check for symptoms, and refer to secondary care.

Diagnosing bipolar
Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust lead nurse practitioner for community mental health Rebecca Butler says that mental health nurses working in GP practices and primary care can help ensure people are seen by a psychiatrist sooner, ‘because they have a better understanding of the early warning signs of bipolar disorder’.

Achieving a diagnosis of bipolar can be difficult, however. Some bipolar symptoms are similar to other mental health disorders, such as depression. ‘It makes it a challenging illness to diagnose,’ says Ms Butler.

Nurses also need time with people to gather the right information ‘to really understand what’s been going on with them and to get a comprehensive history’, she says.

The length of time it can take to diagnose bipolar disorder means it is often made only after the individual has reached a crisis point, adds Ms Butler.

However, a new study from the universities of Keele and Manchester on spotting the early signs of bipolar could help reduce delays between the early signs of bipolar disease and its diagnosis and treatment.

The findings will allow doctors to carry out quicker referral, assessment and treatment of the condition.

The early warning signs, identifiable for over ten years before diagnosis, include:

- Previous depressive episodes.
- Sleep disturbance.
- Substance misuse.
- Receipt of three or more different types of psychotropic medications in a year.
- Escalating self-harm.
- Frequent consultations.
- Missing scheduled appointments.

With these findings in mind, ‘we can be more alert to and aware of bipolar disorder’, says Ms Callard who is also a Queen’s Nurse and professional nurse advocate.

Frequent primary care consultations are believed to be a strong indicator of bipolar; a study found that in the year before the bipolar diagnosis date patients had a median average of 21 consultations, compared with just six in the matched control patients.

Missed GP appointments are another indicator – suggesting that primary care nurses are well-placed to spot early signs of the condition.

‘It helps for primary care nurses to be aware of those early indicators and also how to access that mental health support and guidance,’ says Ms Butler.

And if more nurses in primary care can ask the right questions early on and take comprehensive assessments ‘we might be able to pick up early indicators that someone is experiencing bipolar and can start treatment.

What is bipolar?
Bipolar is a severe mental health condition characterised by significant mood swings including manic or less severe hypomanic highs and depressive lows. Most people with bipolar experience alternating episodes of mania and depression.

According to charity Bipolar UK, 1.3 million people in the UK have bipolar, and 1% to 2% of the population will experience the condition in their lifetime.

Bipolar can only be diagnosed by a psychiatrist after a full assessment to ask about current symptoms, previous symptoms, medical background and any family history of mental illness.
Biomarkers and their implications for mental health diagnosis

A biomarker is a range of objective measures that can capture what is happening in a cell or organism at that time. They are medical signs rather than symptoms reported by the patient and they can be used to measure the presence or progress of disease or the effects of treatment.

Examples include pulse and blood pressure, hormone levels, and more complex laboratory tests of blood and other tissues. Interest is growing in biomarkers for mood disorders. A study from the University of Cambridge suggests biomarker testing could help doctors differentiate between major depressive disorder and bipolar, which have overlapping symptoms but require different pharmacological treatments.

‘Biomarkers identify the biological basis of some mental illnesses,’ says community mental health nurse practitioner Rebecca Butler. ‘In the future they may help determine what medication is better suited to an individual for their mood.’

But people’s environmental and social situations need to be taken into consideration. ‘It’s about individual, holistic care,’ she adds.

Being able to refer to mental health practitioners also reduces the pressure on general practice nurses, she says.

And having mental health nurses working in GP practices also ‘helps to reduce delays in diagnosis’, says Ms Butler.

Blood test

Bipolar UK says that if a simple blood test is introduced into the diagnosis pathway it could improve diagnostic accuracy, speed up diagnosis and potentially open the door to identifying people at risk of developing bipolar.

The new blood test might also add value to nurses’ working diagnosis, when they need to refer to specialist services, or when discussing potential treatments, says Ms Butler.

While an early diagnosis of bipolar is important, she adds: ‘We need to make sure we don’t exclude or oversimplify a diagnosis early on – there’s a range of symptoms that could be linked to different diagnoses and different treatments’.

Understanding more about bipolar disorder is everyone’s responsibility, says Ms Callard.

‘People need to know enough to point someone in the right direction – if that’s the least we can do, that will be helpful for patients and families.’

Before they end up experiencing a hypomanic episode,’ says Ms Butler.

Being aware of early warning signs of bipolar does not necessarily make it less difficult to diagnose. Ms Butler says some of these early warning signs can also be attributed to other mental health conditions, such as personality disorders or substance misuse. ‘These indicators are useful for primary care nurses to know when to refer someone for a more specialist mental health follow-up. But there will still be the need to determine if this could be bipolar or another mental health illness,’ she says.

General practice nurses can identify if patients are frequent attenders and – with their knowledge and understanding of their patients – notice if they are behaving in a way that is unusual for them. They can then highlight concerns to the GP or mental health nurse at the practice, says Ms Callard.

Having mental health practitioners in primary care is important – ‘they are specialists in this area’, says Ms Callard.

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