HEALTH SPOTLIGHT

Scientists try to stop schizophrenia in its tracks

By Malcolm Ritter
AP Science Writer

PORTLAND, MAINE (AP) — She was sociable and happy in high school. But in college that changed abruptly: Depressed and withdrawn, some days she couldn't get out of bed. And that wasn't all.

"I had really odd thoughts," recalled the woman, now 21, who asked that her name be used. While walking across campus at the University of Southern Maine, "sometimes I'd feel like people were just right behind me (who might) jump me or something."

She knew it wasn't true, but she couldn't shake the feeling.

Sometimes, while driving, she saw imaginary, shadowy people on the sidewalk. And now and then, out of nowhere, she would hear a woman's voice in her ear during class, or random soft noises like knocking or the tiny buzz of a newly opened soda can.

When she visited the university health service and talked about feeling depressed, a nurse practitioner saw another problem: a possible case of schizophrenia in the making.

This schizophrenia "prodrôme" — the early signs — involves a troubled mental state usually found in teens and young adults. It can lead to psychosis, the loss of touch with reality that marks not only schizophrenia, but also some forms of depression or mania-depression.

The prodrôme can linger for weeks, or years, before it gives way to psychosis or, perhaps, disappears without a trace.

Researchers have known about this warning phase for decades, but they're still working on how to treat it. Now they're culling in tools like brain scans, DNA studies and hormone research, to dig into its biology. Their hope is that will reveal new ways to detect who's on the road to psychosis and to stop that progression.

In the prodrôme, people can see and hear imaginary things or have odd thoughts. But significantly, they understand these experiences are just illusions, or they have a reasonable explanation.

In contrast, people with psychosis cling to unreasonable explanations instead. When someone interprets an odd halo of light over a bedroom doorway as an urgent message from a dead relative, "that's when they have gone over to the psychic side," said Dr. Thomas McGlashan, a Yale University psychiatry professor.

Some early signs of the prodrôme are subtle. "Sometimes kids will (say) light seems different," and windows are too bright, said Ann Lovegren-Conely, a family nurse practitioner at the University of Southern Maine."

Dr. Michael Macdonald is the author of several medical articles and has received numerous awards and scholarships related to his clinical research. He speaks at professional events and conferences throughout the country and internationally.

Join the YMCA today. We guarantee you will love us!

That's right, a money back guarantee.

 Mention this ad and after 14 days, if you are not in love with our group exercise and yoga classes, friendly staff, convenient locations and hours, we will give you a refund! Let us help you meet your fitness goals. Join today. Call us at 415-777-9622 or visit us at www.ymcas.org

Offer expires 08/1999. YMCA membership and programs are open to everyone. To the extent possible, financial assistance is made available to those in need, so they are not excluded from YMCA programs.

Helping patients locally for 14 years

Dr. Macdonald serves as Chief of the Division of Head and Neck Surgery at the Akron County Hospital in Oakland where he is an Assistant Professor in the East Bay campus of the University of California—San Francisco—Department of Surgery. In the city since 1996, Dr. Macdonald is Director of the Associate Clinical Professor of San Francisco, at 490 Post Street in Union Square, which allows him to escape from his teaching responsibilities to maintain a private practice that focuses on lifestyle-oriented and aesthetic procedures. Management of smearing and OSA stressthesthesituationstwoareofinterestinhispracticeofmedicine,asabalancebetweenmanagementofairwayissuesinHeadandNecksurgeryandthelifestyleeffectsofsmokingandobstructivebreathapnea.Dr. MacdonaldisdoubleBoardCertifiedasadiplomateoftheAmericanBoardofPlasticandReconstructiveSurgeryandanAdolescentandanaoftheAmericanBoardofOtolaryngology—HeadandNeckSurgery.Heis

Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and of the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada.

Dr. Macdonald graduated with honors from the University of Western Ontario, London, received his Medical Doctorate from Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario and completed his surgical training at the University of Toronto in Canada, Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and finally at UCSF — here