



During his 25 years of practicing in the Central Valley, Dr. Bradley T. Wajda (aka “Dr. Brad”) has amassed extensive experience in adult and child psychiatry, as well as comprehensive substance abuse treatment. Catch “Dr. Brad” at RadioPsyched.com. You can also read more from “Dr. Brad” at EsanoHealth.com.

“Tell Me About Your Mother”

by Bradley T. Wajda, D.O.

Think about the term psychiatry. What images enter your mind? People often describe studious physicians in over-stuffed leather chairs with European accents who are short on humor and long on intellect. In an office that evokes a set from “Masterpiece Theater,” you describe your symptoms, after which you leave with a prescription and some insight into your problems.

This view of psychiatry, along with many others, looks nothing like an office representing a medical specialty. Not surprisingly, many people don’t realize that you must attend medical school to be a psychiatrist. Specifically, psychiatry is the medical evaluation and treatment of human behavior. This specialty has come a long way from its portrayal in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” Now psychiatry has the benefits of brain imaging that can “see” how the brain functions as well as specialty testing that can guide medication decisions. Two very unique tests provide a wealth of medical information to the psychiatrist deciding how best to treat your symptoms.

Being able to measure the brain chemicals

and stress hormones that control your moods is a great advantage. This testing not only exists, but is well-researched and covered by most insurance plans. By collecting saliva and urine at home, your doctor can then mail the samples off for testing. When the results are returned to your psychiatrist, he will be able to determine if you’ve been so chronically stressed that your neurochemical levels require support with amino acids (the building blocks of brain chemicals) or other supplements that support brain health. The psychiatrist will also be able to determine better medication choices based on the levels of neurochemicals present.

The following may sound too good to be true, but it is an actual advertisement to psychiatrists: “Try your patients on 32 different psychotropics without giving them a single pill.” A local psychiatrist reportedly responded with the exclamation of, “If only.” However, this is available and covered by most insurance plans. Instead of trial and error, this is a simple DNA swab that will tell your doctor exactly how your liver will metabolize each one of the medications. This helps to avoid potential side





effects and to know when the recommended dosing of the medication may need to be modified.

By combining these two tests, a psychiatrist can see what the brain needs chemically and how each medication option will be processed by the liver. Simply add the standard laboratory work-up that looks at other systems such as the thyroid, and you get a comprehensive view of the patient's physiology – brain, body and liver. Integrating this into a diagnostic interview helps to take a lot of the (educated) guesswork out of treatment decisions in the psychiatric setting. Where I grew up we call that, “no more shootin’ from the hip.”

Let's look at an actual example of a patient, “Sally,” who has been on a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) for her depression. The theoretical mechanism of action for an SSRI is one that requires utilizing the serotonin (neurochemical) that the brain is already

making. Sally complains that her doctor has been increasing her SSRI without any success. Looking at her brain chemicals reveals a very low serotonin level. Clearly, if the level of serotonin is low, then the likelihood of success with an SSRI would also be low. Her DNA swab shows that she clears her medication out of her system much faster than what would be considered normal – revealing that the dosing of the medication would have to be much higher even if her serotonin level was normal. Finally, her traditional lab results reveal a vitamin D deficiency. Using this information, we stop the SSRI, use amino acid supplements to raise her serotonin levels to normal and put her on vitamin D. This results in the complete resolution of her symptoms of depression, without the need for routine antidepressant medication.

Today's psychiatric practices look a lot different than when I started 27 years ago. Now, medication is just one of

the many treatment options to consider when providing care for mental health issues. Transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), enhancing the effectiveness of psychotherapy with medications that affect a new neuroreceptor “of interest” (NMDA which stands for N- methyl D- aspartate), and therapy with natural remedies such as amino acids are but a few of the choices.

Hopefully, these scientific advances will serve to highlight the fact that mental health treatment is just another facet of your overall health care. Recognizing that mental illness is a medical condition should begin to remove the stigma of mental illness and any other barriers that may be keeping a person from seeking treatment. Whether you are seeking treatment for the first time, or you have been struggling with symptoms for years, ask your doctor about how these tools can help them help you feel better. ■