

Health

# Abusive digital avatars might help schizophrenics fight 'voices': Study

## Taking their medication throughout the trial

PARIS: "You're rubbish. You're rubbish. You're a waste of space." The computer avatar pulls no punches as it lays into the young woman, a schizophrenia sufferer, facing the screen. "Can you go away, please?" the woman asks, timidly at first. But after some time, emboldened, she asserts: "I am not going to listen to you any more!" The exchange is part of an innovative treatment developed by specialists in London and Manchester for people with schizophrenia who "hear voices". And it seems to work, the team reported Friday.

Of 75 people who underwent "avatar therapy" in a three-month trial, seven "completely stopped hearing their voices," according to the authors of a study published in *The Lancet Psychiatry*. In the group overall there were "really large and significant decreases in the amount of distress people felt in relation to their voices, the number of times a day they heard the voices, and the extent to which they felt overpowered by the voice," said lead author Tom Craig of King's College London. In a comparison group of 75 patients who received counseling instead of avatar therapy, two said their hallucinations had stopped, the team found. All the participants continued taking their medication throughout the trial.

About two thirds of schizophrenia sufferers live with "voices" — imaginary people who "speak" to them, typically to insult and threaten. It is a "horrible and distressing" condition, Craig said. Most experience the voice as dominant, even omnipotent, and feel inferior and powerless in comparison. For most, drugs reduce the symptoms but about one in four continue hearing voices, said the study.

### More in control

The new treatment helps schizophrenia sufferers confront these disembodied scolds, and



learn to dominate them. All 150 participants had experienced persistent and distressing hallucinations for between one to 20 years, despite taking antipsychotic medication. On average, they lived with three or four distinct voices each. In the first step, a therapist would help the patient create a digital computer simulation, or avatar, of the main voice plaguing them — mimicking what it says, the pitch and tone of its speech, and recreating what they imagined its face would look like.

Over six 50-minute sessions, the patient then confronts their tormenter, materialised on screen, guided by their therapist. The therapist, in a different room, uses a microphone to address the patient over the com-

puter speakers, as well as voicing the avatar's on-screen tirade. In a video demonstrating the method, Craig counsels a woman as she talks to her avatar.

As she asks: "Can you go away, please?" Craig's voice advises: "That's good Lauren, that's good, but can you try and make it a bit stronger for me? Sit up, look at him, and tell him to go away, OK?" As the therapy advances and the patient learns to become more assertive, the avatar starts conceding ground, and eventually acknowledges the person's strong qualities. "The whole experience changes from something that's very frightening to something that's much more in the person's control," Craig explained. — AFP

## Europe's HIV epidemic growing at alarming rate

LONDON: The number of people newly diagnosed with HIV in Europe reached its highest level in 2016 since records began, showing the region's epidemic growing "at an alarming pace", health officials said yesterday. That year, 160,000 people contracted the virus that causes AIDS in the 53 countries that make up the World Health Organization's European region, the agency said in a joint report with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

Around 80 percent of those were in Eastern Europe, the report found. "This is the highest number of cases recorded in one year. If this trend persists, we will not be able to achieve the ... target of ending the HIV epidemic by 2030," the WHO's European regional director, Zsuzsanna Jakab, said in a statement. The trend was particularly worrying, the organizations said, because many patients had already been carrying the HIV infection for several years by the time they

were diagnosed, making the virus harder to control and more likely to have been passed on to others.

Early diagnosis is important with HIV because it allows people to start treatment with AIDS drugs sooner, increasing their chances of living a long and healthy life. "Europe needs to do more in its HIV response," said ECDC director Andrea Ammon. She said the average time from estimated time of infection until a person is diagnosed is three years, "which is far too long". The report said new strategies were needed to expand the reach of HIV testing - including self-testing services and testing provided by lay providers.

Almost 37 million people worldwide have the human immunodeficiency virus that causes AIDS. The majority of cases are in poorer regions such as Africa, where access to testing, prevention and treatment is more limited, but the HIV epidemic has also proved stubborn in wealthier regions like Europe. The WHO European Region comprises 53 countries, with a population of nearly 900 million people. The ECDC/WHO report found that over the past ten years, the rate of newly diagnosed HIV infections in this region has risen by 52 percent from 12 in every 100,000 of population in 2007 to 18.2 for every 100,000 in 2016. That decade-long increase was "mainly driven by the continuing upward trend in the East," the report said. — Reuters

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