

Wake-up call over sleepless teen epidemic

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Teenagers with chronic sleep deprivation are being forced to wait up to a year for treatment at The Children's Hospital at Westmead, putting them at risk of developing serious mood disorders and learning difficulties.

Paediatric sleep physician at The Children's Hospital, Dr Chris Seton, said the waiting list at the hospital's sleep clinic had surged to almost 1000, with the number of teenage patients doubling in the past five years.

He said while adolescents needed almost 9 hours of sleep each night, some children were only sleeping four hours because of the overuse of electronic devices, burden of excessive homework and body-clock shifts.

"A lot of these teenagers are in crisis," he said. "Nine out of 10 of the kids I treat have either dropped out of school or are frequently late.

"The biggest increase is in year 11 and 12 kids whose problems have been compounded by waiting times and stress. By the time they are treated, they've already been diagnosed with psychological disorders like depression and anxiety."

But despite the spike, only about 2 per cent of teenagers are treated for sleep problems because, Dr Seton said, people were "unaware it's a medical condition". He said the leading cause of sleep deprivation was overuse of mobile phones, computers and tablets, all emitting stimulating blue light which lowered the "sleep hormone" melatonin.

"Taking devices to bed means the brain gets blurred about the boundary between sleep and awake activity," he said. "We try and empower parents to ban electronic devices in the bedroom. Teenagers won't do it themselves because they are addicted to technology."

The problem is multiplied by biological changes in puberty that disrupt the sleep-wake cycle and push teenagers to go to bed later.

Dr Seton, who launched Australia's first inter-disciplinary sleep clinic at the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research last month, said a recent Australian survey of children aged between 12 and 18 years found that 70 per cent were sleep-deprived and only 26 per cent got adequate sleep on weeknights. More than half reported negative moods and one in three had compromised learning.

He said "bowing" to teenage body-clock changes and starting school later, about 10am, would combat the growing problem. "A lot of these kids have social jetlag and their body clocks don't fit in with school starting times," he said. "Studies in the US show that when school starts later, students contribute more to class discussions, doze in class less often, miss fewer days, report less depression and have fewer car crashes."

He said 80 per cent of children he treated were from private schools, many who did "more academic work and extra-curricular activities than they used to". "I see kids that get up at 4.30am to go to swimming training four days a week and then they have to come home and do three hours of homework each night," he said. "Their sleep is what suffers."

Blue Mountains teenager Andrew Armstrong has been in a cycle of sleep deprivation for about four years, often getting six hours of sleep each night.

"At the moment I'll sit awake for about three hours and won't go into a deep sleep until 6am," he said.

After consulting a GP and a psychiatrist, the 16-year-old is taking part in an overnight sleep study that will monitor his heart rate, eye movement and dream patterns.

"Every day I find it very difficult to concentrate and apply myself at getting school assignments done," he said. "I'm just tired all the time."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/wakeup-call-over-sleepless-teen-epidemic-20140524-38vu0.html>