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Mind Matters: The Mind Institute links patients, research

John Rasure
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TODAY'S AUTHOR

John Rasure is CEO of The Mind Institute, based in Albuquerque.

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University of New Mexico: What is the Mind Institute and where did it come from?

John Rasure: The Mind Institute, an acronym for Mental Illness and Neurosciences Discovery, was founded in 1998 to develop better neuroimaging technology for diagnosing mental illness. U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici's vision was to establish a national program to build cutting-edge magnetic resonance imaging and magnetoencephalogram neuroimaging systems to better understand the human brain and its role in mental illness.

This important task was carried out by Mind's initial collaborators: the University of New Mexico, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Massachusetts General Hospital's Martinos Biomedical Imaging Center (in coordination with Harvard and MIT), and the University of Minnesota.

Since that time, both the network and our mission have expanded beyond building neuroimaging tools because a comprehensive understanding of mental illness requires

a more fundamental and systematic understanding of the brain.

This has led to the next phase in our mission, which is to transition our paradigm for schizophrenia imaging and research as a pathfinder for other national programs that address mental illness issues, like learning disabilities and addiction. We want to create national programs that link research to mental illness patients - and mental illness patients to research.

UNM: What are your primary areas of focus?

Rasure: We're focused on larger social issues like schizophrenia, psychopathy, addiction, learning disabilities, intelligence and creativity. I should clarify that we're not an institution dedicated to studying a single disease. For example, we're not the Schizophrenia Institute or the Center for Depression, but we are focusing our efforts to have the greatest impact.

Consider this: schizophrenia affects approximately 2.5 million men, women and children in the nation at an annual cost of approximately \$65 billion.



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Ultimately, one of our core missions is to link research to patient care. We want to add the public to our list of research benefactors - let's get the science through the lab, through academia and into the hands of the patients.

By better casting our mental illness research net, we can combine our findings with others and build a solution. We need to be operating at a scale where we're assessing thousands of mental illness patients to extract really good, usable data.

UNM: What and how many specific studies are you involved in now?

Rasure: We're involved in more than a dozen research projects that receive direct funding and other support from the institute. But the bigger picture is that we're influencing the direction of research. For example, the Center for Magnetic Resonance Research at the University of Minnesota may never have thought about using its equipment to research schizophrenia, but now it is. We're influencing the research of our partner institutions.

And we're working with Sandia and Los Alamos national labs in other areas. There's an emerging trend in the defense and intelligence communities that neuroscience is of strategic importance to national security. They're beginning to ask questions like, "What happens if we are able to develop a drug to treat Alzheimer's disease - but it also improves the intelligence or learning capacity of healthy people?"

A soldier in the field often has to deal with information overload, yet make rapid-fire decisions. Or, think of the mayor of San Francisco having to respond to an 8.5 earthquake.

While such learning in crisis situations is beneficial, what happens if these drugs get into the hands of terrorist organizations? How do we respond?

UNM: What's in the Mind's future?

Rasure: Over the next 10 years, we want to focus on the research process itself and how we can link results to patients. We want to make it part of how research is done, in order to accelerate the development of diagnostic tools and treatments.

There are myriad organizations conducting research, from public institutions to private companies. It's likely that the Mind's claim to fame won't be in any specific clinical area, but how we gather, evaluate and store research data from hundreds of studies worldwide, and how we link it to patient care.

In the international science community, there's very little integration of research results, so we want to be the leader in neurosystems engineering and neuro-informatics.

There's no such thing as a "Mental Illness Center." We have cancer centers that operate under the umbrella and standards of the National Cancer Institute, but there's nothing like that for mental health. I believe that the Mind's influence will be in creating a national program in mental illness research that could lead to national mental illness centers, just like cancer centers.

UNM: What about the future of mental illness?

Rasure: Nobody knows. There are 65 million people in the nation affected by mental illness. Much has been learned over the past several decades in terms of what we believe to be the causes of mental illness. Conventional wisdom now says that there's a biological basis for mental illness - it's a combination of genetics and environment - but it hasn't always been that way. So a relatively new starting point has been introduced in the last century.

As for the future, imagine finding a cure for addiction, or an inoculation to prevent psychotic events.

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