Can Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Onset Occur in Adulthood?

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In this issue of JAMA Psychiatry, 2 large, longitudinal, population studies from Brazil1 and the United Kingdom2 propose a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They conclude, not only that the onset of ADHD can occur in adulthood, but that childhood-onset and adult-onset ADHD may be distinct syndromes.

Prior to these publications, the diagnosis of ADHD in adults had evolved in 2 directions. A meta-analysis3 of longitudinal studies documented an age-dependent decline in the expression of ADHD symptoms. Two-thirds of youth with ADHD continued to have impairing symptoms of ADHD in young adulthood, despite only 15% meeting full diagnostic criteria for the disorder. The Brazilian and UK studies found the expected rate of persistence to ages 18 to 19 years: 17.2% and 21.9%, respectively. A longitudinal population study4 from New Zealand observed a 4.9% persistence rate of ADHD to age 38 years. Practitioners take heed: these low rates of cases meeting full diagnostic criteria ignore the much higher persistence rate of impairing ADHD symptoms, which are relevant in clinical practice.3

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