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Brain 'Switch' Helps Doctors Deal With Patients' Pain

Area that helps them appreciate another's discomfort shuts down, study finds

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HealthDay

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FRIDAY, Sept. 28 (HealthDay News) -- Doctors are able to switch off the part of their brain that helps them appreciate the pain patients experience during treatment, and instead turn on a brain area that controls emotions, according a study by American and Taiwanese researchers.

Because they sometimes have to inflict pain on patients while treating them, doctors have to develop the ability not to be distracted by the suffering of patients, explained co-author Jean Decety, a psychology and psychiatry professor at the University of Chicago.

"They have learned through their training and practice to keep a detached perspective; without such a mechanism, performing their practice could be overwhelming or distressing, and, as a consequence, impair their ability to be of assistance for their patients," Decety said in a prepared statement.

In this study, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) was used to monitor brain responses in 14 doctors and a control group of 14 other people as they watched videos of people being pricked with acupuncture needles around the mouth and being touched with Q-tips.

The doctors showed no response in the area of the brain that registers another person's pain when they saw someone pricked with an acupuncture needle or touched with a Q-tip. The doctors did show heightened activity in the brain region that controls emotions.

When asked to rate the pain likely felt by the patients as they were pricked by the needles, the doctors said it was likely about 3 on a 10-point scale (10 being the most pain), while those in the control group rated the patients' pain at about 7 points.

The study is currently available online and is expected to be published in the Oct. 9 issue of the journal *Current Biology*.

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