Schizophrenia’s family ties invoke necessity of genetics in mental illness research

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

That schizophrenia runs in families was evident even to the person who first defined the illness. In 1911, Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss-German psychiatrist, published a book describing a series of cases of men and women, typically in their teens and early twenties, whose thoughts had begun to tangle and degenerate.

Bleuler tried to find an explanation for the mysterious symptoms, but there was only one seemingly common element: schizophrenic patients tended to have first-degree relatives who were also schizophrenic. He had no tools to understand the mechanism behind the heredity. The word “gene” had been coined just two years before Bleuler published his book. The notion that a mental illness could be carried across generations by unitary, indivisible factors—corpuscles of information threading through families—would have struck most of Bleuler’s contemporaries as mad in its own right.

In the nineteen-sixties, Bleuler’s hunch was confirmed by twin studies. Psychiatrists determined that if an identical twin was schizophrenic the other twin had a forty-to-fifty-per-cent chance of developing the disease—fiftyfold higher than the risk in the general population. By the early two-thousands, large population studies had revealed a strong genetic link between schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Read full, original post: Runs in the family