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# A Bedtime Story

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## Sunday Forum: A bedtime story

### It's daylight savings time, so the National Sleep Foundation will offer the usual useless nostrums for insomniacs, GAYLE GREENE says

Sunday, March 09, 2008

As we begin National Sleep Awareness Week, that time of year we set the clocks forward, the National Sleep Foundation is busily "Waking America to the Importance of Sleep." A fine and laudable mission, but I wonder, as I watch sleep get its twice-annual 15 minutes of fame -- what about those of us who just can't sleep? It's all very well to alert us to the bad things sleep deprivation does to us and the good things sleep does for us, but for a chronic insomniac, a good night's sleep is about as possible as flight without a plane.

Approximately a third of the U.S. adult population suffers with insomnia enough to complain about it and as many as 10 percent to 15 percent have it chronically. Among the poor, the female and the elderly, incidence is much higher -- in people over 65, estimates are as high as 60 percent. Look on the Web, trawl through sites like Sleepnet and Talkaboutsleap, and you'll hear stories of lives wrecked by this affliction, marriages ruined, educations abandoned, careers destroyed. And there will soon be many more of us, as baby boomers age. By 2050, one in five of the population will be 60 or older.

"Nobody ever died of insomnia" is something we often hear, but chronic sleep loss puts people at risk of diabetes, obesity, heart attack, stroke and accidents. Insomniacs have two to three times the rate of doctor consultations as people without sleep complaints, twice the number of hospitalizations and more than twice the rate of auto accidents.

We hear a lot about the impact Alzheimer's Disease will have on our crumbling health-care system; we hear about the toll diabetes and obesity take. But what about the burden insomnia is adding?

Researchers estimate the cost of sleep disorders in the billions, but their figures take no account of the toll in suffering. Insomnia puts people at higher risk for depression, alcoholism and suicide. It augments the other losses that come with age: loss of health, work, loved ones. I watched an aunt stumble through her last years in a sleep-deprived stupor; I saw a friend live out her last days ravaged more by the sleep loss that came with her Parkinson's than by the disease itself. There are untold millions whose lives are diminished beyond calculation.

What does the National Sleep Foundation have to offer us? Keep a regular sleep schedule, sleep in a dark, quiet room, avoid caffeine and alcohol, do not engage in stimulating activities or exercise in the evening, don't worry so much, don't stress. All well and fine, but nothing I didn't hear from my father (a doctor) many years ago, when I first began complaining about my sleepless nights: "If you'd only listen to your mother and go to bed at a decent hour. If you only wouldn't get so wound up ... "

That was in 1958.

But it's not enough, this knee-jerk tendency to blame the victim, to say it's "all in your head." That's been said of everything from autism to ulcers, from multiple sclerosis to migraines, conditions long thought to be psychological that are now known to have physiological bases -- as insomnia will someday be discovered to have.

More and more sleep research is pointing to the neurobiological and genetic bases of sleep disorders, more is being learned about insomnia's links with age and with hormones -- no surprise to women, who have always known that hormonal fluctuations make sleep worse. Yet we continue to be told that insomnia is caused by worry, stress, depression, anxiety or bad attitudes and habits.

So I'm a little tired of National Sleep Awareness Week. Yes, of course, people should be aware of the benefits of sleep and make more room for it in their lives. Nobody understands that better than a chronic insomniac. The idea that people willingly stint on sleep boggles the mind of someone who sleeps as badly as I do.

But how about having a National Insomnia Awareness week? No -- how about a month, to make up for the decades of neglect, and then how about some funding to back the fine talk? How about more than the \$20 million the National Institutes of Health spent on insomnia in 2005, most of which went to therapies, to managing the problem rather than getting to the causes of this affliction that's not much better understood than it was half a century ago?

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