Correspondence
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Utilisation of psychotropic medications

The timely article by Verdoux & Bégaud hopefully begins to redress the imbalance between randomised controlled trials and other ways of evaluating drug treatments. I would like to present further evidence for the ‘gap between guidelines and utilisation . . . for psychotropic medications’ (Verdoux & Bégaud, 2004).

Using the Drug Report of the German Public Health Insurance (Schwabe & Pfaffrath, 1996), which is a database of all prescriptions reimbursed by the general health insurance system (which accounts for more than 80% of all prescriptions), and a database from the Institute for Medical Statistics, Frankfurt/Main, which refers to a representative sample of 2806 physicians in private practice who report four times a year all prescriptions during 1 week, we found that only 14% of prescriptions for neuroleptic drugs were for schizophrenic psychoses, 18% for other paranoid psychoses and 5% for affective disorders (Linden & Thiels, 2001). Almost half of the neuroleptic prescriptions were written for patients aged 65 years or older. Over the period 1986 to 1995 the prescribing of neuroleptics increased steadily in parallel with a decrease in prescriptions for benzodiazepines.

Also I would like to contradict the assumption that antipsychotics are ‘mainly prescribed by specialists’ (Verdoux & Bégaud, 2004). Using the pharmacoepidemiological data described above, we found that only 40% of neuroleptic drugs were prescribed by psychiatrists/neurologists (i.e. by Nervenärzten who trained in both specialties, as most German psychiatrists and neurologists do).

Data from a 6-month prospective drug utilisation observation study on 3858 women and 1594 men prescribed the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor sertraline shows that it is not only the type of psychotropic drug that determines whether it is ‘commonly prescribed by primary care practitioners’ (Verdoux & Bégaud, 2004) but also the gender of the patient. A higher percentage of women with depression were treated by general practitioners, compared with men with depression who were more likely to be seen by psychiatrists, although women were more likely to present with recurrent rather than first-episode depression and to have been previously treated for depression.

Declaration of interest

C.T. has twice been paid for writing publications for drug companies, most recently for Boehringer Ingelheim Pharma KG, Germany.


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Authors’ reply: The German findings on antipsychotic prescription in naturalistic conditions provide a good illustration of the question raised in our editorial regarding the risk of widespread use of antipsychotics in primary care (Verdoux & Bégaud, 2004). Contrary to the statement of the author, there is no contradiction between her point of view and ours regarding the fact that antipsychotics are widely prescribed in primary care. The exact quotation of our text is ‘drugs assumed to be mainly prescribed by specialists, such as antipsychotics’, suggesting that there may be differences between assumptions and facts. The German findings are strikingly similar to those obtained using the social security insurance database in Aquitaine (south-west France), showing that general practitioners (GPs) were the most numerous prescribers (64%) of risperidone, followed by psychiatrists (34%) (Martin et al., 2004). More recently, we have carried out a survey questionnaire mailed to all GPs (n=3829) practising in Aquitaine to explore management of early psychosis in primary care, with a response rate of 23% (further details available from the authors on request). As part of this survey, we collected data on prescription behaviour. We found that over the preceding month, one out of three GPs (34%) initiated at least one new treatment with one of the antipsychotic drugs marketed in France at this time (amisulpride, olanzapine, risperidone). Over the same 1-month period, nearly half of GPs (42%) reported a visit from at least one pharmaceutical company representative promoting these antipsychotic drugs. Hence, we have further reason to feel concerned by the widespread use of these drugs in primary care, probably, at least in part, as a result of drug promotion. As proposed by Thiels, it is thus of great interest to explore which specific subgroups are at greater risk of being exposed to increased use of anti-psychotics. With respect to the hypothesis that there may be a trend favouring antipsychotic instead of benzodiazepine prescription in elderly patients, it is however difficult to conclude that such a strategy is more risky than beneficial for this population, considering the risks potentially associated with benzodiazepine prescription in the elderly (Verdoux et al., 2004).

Declaration of interest

H. V. has acted as a consultant to the pharmaceutical companies Bristol-Myers-Squibb, Eli Lilly, Janssen-Cilag, Lundbeck and Sanofi-Synthelabo.


Urbanisation and psychosis

A recent study of urbanisation and incidence of psychosis was based on data from the excellent Swedish population registers (Sundquist et al., 2004). Unfortunately, there are methodological problems with the study.

Sundquist et al. argue that the prospective nature of their data allowed them to calculate incidence rates of psychoses rather than prevalence rates. However, their study confuses readmission and incidence rates. In incidence studies, the event of interest is new occurrence of a specified disease (see e.g. Clayton & Hills, 1993). Sundquist et al.’s cohort consists of people aged 25–64 years in 1996 (i.e. born 1932–1971). They analyse the data as incident data although they do not have this information. For persons who enter the study in old age, they claim that when admitted during the study period 1997–1999 this is the first admission ever of these people. They do, however, exclude people admitted 1992–1996, but this only partly solves this problem (e.g. for people born in 1932 in their study, the earliest possible age at onset of psychosis is 60 years). Let us say the earliest age at onset of psychosis is 25 years, the authors lack information on first admission for psychosis among people born 1966 or earlier. Roughty, they do not have information on admission for psychosis among people born 1932–1966, about 85% of the study population. If the earliest age of first admission for psychosis is 15 years (Pedersen & Mortensen, 2001), the authors lack information on first admission for all people. This severely violates the assumptions of an incidence study (Breslow & Day, 1987), and the results may be extremely biased.

Sundquist et al. measure urbanisation as the place where cohort members lived around 1996. Using this measure of urbanisation – in combination with the problems mentioned above – implies problems with causality; is the disease a result of the urbanisation or is the urbanisation a result of the disease?

Based on these methodological errors, it is difficult to interpret their findings. However, some possible biases include selective migration of people with psychosis after disease onset, and urban–rural differences in the readmission rates for people with psychosis.

We agree that urban–rural differences in admission rates could exist if, for example, the distribution of psychiatric beds differed between urban and rural areas. We checked this possible bias and found that the number of psychiatric beds per 1000 inhabitants differed very little across Sweden.

To sum up, our large-scale study sheds new light on the inconsistencies in previous research since we used the comprehensive Swedish registers and adjusted our results for several possible confounders. In addition, the urbanisation measure was calculated as actual numbers of inhabitants per area unit, which should reflect the level of urbanisation in the most appropriate way.

Anthropology and psychiatry

From the perspective of anthropological psychiatry, Harland et al. (2004) suggest that the social change experienced by migrants may predispose to schizophrenia. The same may apply to other forms of social change, such as those changes which lead to revitalisation phenomena and new religious movements. Psychiatric anthropologists who have studied new religious movements have pointed out that new forms of belief system may originate in the hallucinatory or delusional experience of a single individual (Littlewood, 1984). Wallace (1956) applied the term ‘mazeway resynthesis’ to the change in belief system which occurs in prophets, the mazeway being to the individual what culture is to society, so that the prophet awakes to a new reality which he or she then tries to impart to followers; if successful, the prophet becomes the leader of a new religious movement; otherwise, he or she is alienated from the parent group and is likely to be labelled as mentally ill. Foukls (1977) compared the prophet to the patient with schizophrenia, and noted that they shared not only the capacity to undergo a radical change in belief system but also various ‘precirbiod’ features.
For many years population geneticists have been surprised that the genetic tendency to schizophrenia is maintained in spite of the reduced fertility of those affected (Crow, 1995). However, the fertility of cult leaders is often increased, owing to increased mating opportunities within the cult, and to the possibility of an ‘adaptable radiation’ in a new land following the inevitable social and geographical alienation of the cult from the parent group. If the genes responsible for schizophrenia and prophetic experience were the same, it is possible that the fecundity of successful cult leaders might balance the loss of genes both in people with schizophrenia and in unsuccessful cult leaders (Price & Stevens, 1998).

Such evolutionary speculations are independent of the proximal causes of schizophrenia, which might be a neurodevelopmental disorder or might even be part of the extended phenotype of a micro-organism. But they do suggest that if we find something in the brains of our patients, we should ask our psychiatric anthropological colleagues to look for the same thing in the brains of the founders of new religious movements.


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Case reports

Dr Williams (2004) courageously urges the Editor to think again regarding his predecessor’s joy at hastening the demise of the case report.

Medicine generally is being dehumanised; if psychiatry follows suit, then we cannot complain that the masses are deserting us for alternative medicine. The bias of the Journal towards so-called ‘pure science’ while discarding the whole-person approach will accelerate the dehumanising process. Following the massive development of drug therapy from the mid-1950s there was a golden era when the so-called controlled experiments supported what we clinicians found in practice – that people improved with antidepressants and anxiolytics.

For the past 40 years or so the Journal has been full of further ‘research’ papers which have added little of note to our psychiatric knowledge. At the same time much fruitful research has occurred in the clinical field through the analysis of narrative and transference and the study of case reports.

Uncommon Psychiatric Syndromes (Enoch & Ball, 2001), described by Littlewood (2004) as a pioneering book, now in its fourth edition and translated into several languages, arose from one case report, albeit followed by a further 35 years’ (continuing) research.

One hundred years ago

Types of alcoholic insanity

An important discussion on the above subject was held at the Boston Society of Psychiatry and Neurology, an account of which is published in the Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease for December, 1904. Dr. H. W. Mitchell of Boston introduced the discussion in a paper based on the study of 148 patients (excluding cases of true dipsomania which exhibited no insane symptoms) at the Danvers Hospital for the Insane, or 13 per cent of the male patients admitted. The cases were grouped as follows: delirium tremens, acute and
subacute alcoholic hallucinations, delusional alcoholic insanity, and alcoholic dementia. Two were cases of Korsakoff's psychosis polyneuritica of alcoholic origin. He found that among cases of delirium tremens “nearly all recovered without development of the graver forms of alcoholic insanity”. The prognosis in cases of acute alcoholic hallucination was good for the attack but relapses due to renewal of drinking habits were common. These cases were characterised by vivid auditory and visual hallucinations, the former predominating, with little disturbance of consciousness and with transitory delusions probably based upon the hallucinations. In the case of subacute alcoholism there were auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile hallucinations, with more prolonged persistence of delusions. Periodic relapses were seen in these cases during their stay in hospital, the intervals between the attacks being periods of practically normal mental condition. Permanent mental deterioration and dementia were the ultimate goal of this class of cases. Alcoholic delusional insanity was the term used for cases showing a development of delusions somewhat resembling paranoia. In many cases the delusions are elaborated from hallucinations. “Ideas of marital infidelity, poisoning, and persecution were most common in this class of cases.” A tendency to incurable chronicity was observed in many and only a small proportion of cases recovered. Alcoholic dementia comprised cases in which marked mental deterioration and decay of intelligence and morality were the predominant symptoms and this occurred as the result of many years of more or less continuous use of strong spirits. Permanent mental deterioration was observed in all the cases studied. Among the various alcoholic psychoses were seen many cases resembling general paralysis, the exact diagnosis being possible only after prolonged observation – weeks or months. 10 per cent of the total cases suffered occasionally from epileptiform convulsions, while suicidal attempts and acts of violence were common in all classes of cases – points of medico-legal interest. An alcoholic or an insane parentage was common and made the prognosis bad. Somatic and grandiose delusions with alteration of the sense of personal identity were unfavourable symptoms in delusional cases. In continuing the discussion Dr. Woodbury said that 90% of cases recovered from first attacks of delirium tremens. Dr. Philip O. Knapp said that in the wards and clinics of the Boston City Hospital cases of delirium tremens, hallucination, and alcoholic dementia were fairly common, while paranoid forms were quite rare. Dr. Mitchell, in reply, said that alcoholic pseudo-paresis resembling general paralysis was fairly common. Such patients had sluggish pupils which, however, reacted to light. Inequality of the pupils and failure of the reflex to light were found practically only in cases which had had syphilis. The delusional or paranoid cases in his series amounted to nearly one-fifth of the total. Parental intemperance was a common etiological factor. The milder forms of alcoholic psychosis occurred in early life frequently in association with habits of drinking. Alcoholic dementia showed itself in middle age or later and was the result of heavy and continuous drinking for many years.

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