Correspondence

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Contents
- Expansion of psychological therapies
- Integrated multidisciplinary diagnostic approach for dementia
- Aripiprazole in the treatment of primary delusional parasitosis
- 150 years of evolutionary theory

Expansion of psychological therapies

Working as a psychiatrist in crisis resolution/home treatment, where over 20% of our patients fall within the category of the population discussed by Summerfield & Veale,1 I would like to express my opinion on their debate. Over 20% of patients with depression, anxiety and related disorders is a significant percentage, however not a surprise, as this is similar to the percentage reported by the Office for National Statistics.2

Summerfield’s concerns about ‘medicalising the problems of living’, ‘contribution of mental disorder to sickness absence’ and the economic cost of disability benefits are indeed justified and alarming. However, these are associated and complicating factors, rather than the core issue of this debate.

The main issue is the expansion of psychological therapies, mainly cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which is the recommended first-line treatment for mild to moderate depression, anxiety and related disorders. In fact one of the first key messages in the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance for anxiety and related disorders is ‘If left untreated, they are costly to both individual and society’.34 and any psychiatrist working in the community cannot deny this fact.

Although I agree with Summerfield that ‘normal stress’ and problems of living should not be medicalised and people should not be given a ‘mental disorder card’ to claim sick leave and unjustified benefits, hence promoting the culture of the ‘sick role’, equally care should be taken not to underestimate the need for short-term interventions which can prevent long-term disability. I believe that the key would be in balancing between non-medicalising and providing meaningful interventions where necessary.

Short-term psychological therapies such as CBT, which is backed by evidence, seem to be a very useful way of providing necessary interventions without medicalising or encouraging the sick-role culture. Medicalising would be the use of medications and hospital admissions, rather than the use of CBT, which aims to provide positive change in thinking and behaviour, and giving the responsibility back to the patient, thus preventing people from becoming ‘cases’ in the long term.

Working in the community in the crisis resolution/home treatment team, we receive a huge number of referrals from primary care of patients who are not suitable for specialist services yet whose mental health problems are not manageable within the primary care setting. Many of these patients are more suitable for short-term psychological therapy; however, because of a lack of quick access to such services and with waiting lists of 1 year, the risk of medicalisation and of patients becoming ‘cases’ increases.

In fact, the very reasons Summerfield has mentioned in his side of the debate are enough to suggest that the expansion of psychological therapies is essential, rather than unnecessary.

On the other hand, Veale’s comment on the quality of psychological services is also very significant. The emphasis should not only be on expanding services and increasing access, but also on improving and monitoring the services provided. Truly, qualification as a clinical psychologist is not adequate to practise CBT, as CBT is a postgraduate qualification. At present, most services have a shortage of properly qualified CBT therapists.


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In his criticism of the expansion of psychological therapies, Summerfield1 contends quite reasonably that ‘talking therapies are grounded in an ineffably Western version of a person’. Socio-demographic factors and cultural background influence the perception of symptoms of mental illness and, hence, engagement with services. As Veale1 rightly points out, CBT does not ignore the social context of the illness but cultural adaptations and understanding of ethnic, cultural and religious interpretations is an area which currently remains underdeveloped.

We are seeking to address this by developing a qualitative methodology which can be used to produce culturally sensitive CBT for diverse ethnic groups. Two projects are underway: in Pakistan, we are assessing whether CBT for depression is compatible with local beliefs and values, and if so, what adaptation to manuals, training and practice is needed. In the UK, a similar project is tackling CBT for psychosis in Black and minority ethnic populations. Both projects involve interviewing lay groups, patients who have and have not had CBT, mental health professionals from the relevant ethnic groups and CBT therapists. Analysis of transcripts from the Pakistan project does endorse the use of CBT but has already indicated, for example, that presentation of depression is frequently somatic and CBT has to directly address this. Literal translation into Urdu of terms used in CBT may not be possible or can be misleading. Adaptation for different levels of literacy is needed. Family members tend to accompany patients and are essential to successful work. Often there is better engagement with local faith healers and religious leaders. Similarly, African and African–Caribbean people have more usually consulted their traditional healers for help. Often within similar African cultures, the concept of mental illness differs considerably.7 Piloting of an adapted manual has begun and further evaluation of culturally sensitive CBT in Pakistan and the UK is planned. These measures are essential to the success of the CBT programme in a multicultural society.


It is this shaping of a different kind of citizen that is evoked from the lived contexts that distort care priorities and have focused on the prescribing and monitoring of medication.1 Wolf et al’s controlled trial has provided support for integration of services for the diagnosis and care of dementia. This has to be organised not only in the initial diagnostic stages but also on an ongoing basis, with close liaison between multidisciplinary health services, local social work departments and primary care throughout the course of patients’ progressive illness.

Authors’ reply:  Organisational models designed to create connectivity, alignment and collaboration within and between the cure and care sectors are needed, and our study provides the evidence to support this approach. Our diagnostic intervention indeed lasted only a few weeks, but in our view, dementia care is a chain of services, starting with a short but comprehensive diagnostic chain, and we acknowledge that this is an ongoing process.

In contrast to McNulty et al, who found the results of our study modest, we value a difference of almost 10% between groups regarding health-related quality of life as substantial and clinically relevant, and higher than found in any pharmacological study in dementia so far.

The suggestion of McNulty et al to compare different types of services would be interesting, but the design of our study was not appropriate for such a reanalysis, as it would be subject to confounding by indication.

Nevertheless, McNulty et al raise the important point that dementia care needs an integrated approach on an ongoing basis, and we agree wholeheartedly.
Aripiprazole in the treatment of primary delusional parasitosis

The review by Lepping et al 1 points out the difficulty of engaging patients with primary delusional parasitosis in psychiatric treatment owing to their poor insight. Our clinical experience fully supports this. The authors emphasise the lack of randomised controlled studies in this field and the limited, but promising, anecdotal literature on the use of atypical antipsychotics. Their systematic review did not identify any reports of aripiprazole in the treatment of primary delusional parasitosis. However, since this review was accepted for publication, a case report has appeared reporting the successful use of aripiprazole in an 85-year-old woman with primary delusional parasitosis. 5

Aripiprazole has a unique pharmacological profile that includes partial agonist activity at dopamine D2 and serotonin 5-HT1A receptors. It has a favourable side-effect profile relative to other antipsychotics. 3 It is non-sedating and has little propensity to cause weight gain, extrapyramidal symptoms, prolactin elevation and metabolic disturbance. However, it can cause nausea and akathisia in some patients. The favourable tolerability profile may be a particular benefit in primary delusional parasitosis as these patients are often reluctant to consider antipsychotic treatment and tolerate medication poorly. Aripiprazole has a long half-life (about 60 h) compared with other oral antipsychotics, 5 which means that occasional missed doses are less likely to affect clinical outcome. Consequently, aripiprazole may be particularly useful when interrupted adherence with medication is a problem, a situation often encountered in primary delusional parasitosis. Interestingly, in the five main studies of antipsychotic treatment of primary delusional parasitosis identified by Lepping et al, 1 the highest remission rate (73%) was in the only study that assessed antipsychotic depots. 5 Although the small sample sizes limit the value of cross-study comparisons, this result is consistent with the view that medication adherence is poor in primary delusional parasitosis and that treatments that can overcome this, in this case a depot antipsychotic, can lead to better outcomes.

In summary, although further evidence is needed to establish the efficacy of aripiprazole in primary delusional parasitosis, it seems reasonable to consider this drug when discussing treatment choices with patients.

Declaration of interest
P.M.H. has received fees for lecturing and consultancy from Bristol-Myers Squibb.


Authors’ reply: Narayan et al suggest that the pharmacokinetics (half-life of 60–80 h) and side-effect profile of aripiprazole may make it particularly interesting for the treatment of primary delusional parasitosis where adherence to and engagement with treatment are the most significant challenges. They mention a case report of an 85-year-old woman with primary delusional parasitosis, who fully responded to aripiprazole. 1 It is interesting that our own systematic review showed that the best response rates were achieved with first-generation depot antipsychotics. 2

However, other first-generation antipsychotics with relatively long half-lives did not differ from those with shorter half-lives. Experience with second-generation antipsychotics with long half-lives is limited to one case with partial remission to sertindole 3 and one recent case treated with paliperidone. 4 The level of efficacy of second-generation antipsychotics in delusional parasitosis is less than certain. Our own review showed that only 25% of patients treated with a second-generation antipsychotic achieved full remission in primary delusional parasitosis. The side-effect profile of aripiprazole may be advantageous with regard to the development of metabolic syndrome, but this is often less important in delusional parasitosis because of the often short period of time that patients agree to take medication. Furthermore, the common side-effect of insomnia is a real problem with aripiprazole in a patient group that already suffers from agitation and insomnia because of persistent itching.

We therefore do not agree that the current evidence available for aripiprazole makes it the substance of choice among second-generation antipsychotics for primary delusional parasitosis despite its favourable pharmacokinetic profile and low risk of metabolic and cardiac complications. There are substantially more successful reports on risperidone (more than 30) and olanzapine (more than 15) as well as our own positive experience with amisulpride than case reports on aripiprazole in both primary and secondary delusional parasitosis. However, clinical studies, not case reports, will be needed to further establish second-generation antipsychotics in delusional parasitosis and show their individual effects in this syndrome.

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150 years of evolutionary theory

In the distant future I see open fields for more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation. 1
Charles Darwin first recorded his ideas on ‘transmutation’, a word used to signify the changeable nature of species, in 1844. However, he did not publish his ideas then but instead embarked on painstaking studies of molluscs and other subjects for many years in his home-based laboratory, publishing widely and making some novel discoveries in the area of mollusc biology. We will never know whether he would have got around to publishing his theory of evolution if it had not been for the work of a young naturalist called Alfred Russel Wallace, who forwarded his own (remarkably similar) ideas on the subject to Darwin in 1858. As a result, the two men had their findings jointly presented to the Linnaean Society one and a half centuries ago this year, on July 1st 1858, an event that initially passed by relatively quietly, but that was soon to rock the scientific establishment and society as a whole. Darwin’s notebooks prove that he had been developing his theories on ‘transmutation’ for the previous 20 years, based on his observations on the HMS Beagle and his own ‘home-work’ on molluscs and numerous other subjects. Potential reasons as to Darwin’s delay in publishing his findings include his wish to produce as much supportive scientific evidence as possible, ambivalence about publishing a Godless theory in a religious society and, at a personal level, a reluctance to offend his devoted wife Emma, who was a devout Christian.3

Charles Darwin contributed directly to modern psychology and psychiatry in the form of his book The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, which was effectively the first textbook on human evolutionary psychology and psychiatry.4 His indirect contribution is far more significant, and involves the application by many others of evolutionary principles to psychology and psychiatry.5–7 However, despite the universal acceptance of evolutionary theory in all branches of the biological sciences, evolution is effectively ignored in mainstream medicine and, if psychology and psychiatry are to be considered as belonging to the biological (as opposed to the social) sciences, then evolutionary theory must have relevance to the study of the human mind.8

In a time when ‘biological psychiatry’ has taken on hopefully reductionistic connotations, for example relating the complexity of human emotions and psychopathology to often questionable and over-simplistic neurotransmitter theories, psychiatry and psychology were never more in need of the fresh perspectives that evolutionary theory would bring to the study of the human mind. A 21st-century presentation to the Linnaean Society is needed, this time on evolutionary psychology and psychiatry.
