

REPORT

Symposium on the prescribing and use of psychotropic drugs

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA 1-2 JULY, 1972

IN November 1971, the organiser of this conference, Dr Peter Parish, published his analysis *The Prescribing of Psychotropic Drugs in General Practice*, as a supplement to this *Journal*.

He chronicled the explosive increase in the prescribing of psychotropic drugs, and posed a number of difficult questions for general practitioners. Why were the drugs being prescribed? What factors governed their choice? What were the doctors' diagnostic criteria? What were the pressures, clinical, social, psychological and commercial, acting on both doctors and patients, which accounting for 47.2 million psychotropic drug prescriptions, dispensed under the National Health Service in 1970.

Organisation

About 90 people came to the Swansea symposium, to examine these and similar questions, and to look for answers. They included general practitioners, psychiatrists, sociologists, epidemiologists, psychotherapists, psycho-pharmacologists and economists. Papers were read about the patients who take these drugs and about the doctors who prescribe them; about the prevalence of psychiatric illness in general practice and about how it is recognised by the general practitioner; about the uses of the different categories of drugs and about their dangers and unwanted actions; and finally, about all the many factors which influence the doctor and the patient, who are the central actors in the drama.

Discussion

A great deal was said, but to what purpose? Psychiatrists like Dr William Sargant, Dr J. Pollitt and Dr P. Dally, well known proponents of the physical approach to their discipline, stated their case with enthusiasm. However, there was little real dialogue between them and the many general practitioners who were sceptical or worried about their own use of these drugs, and who were not entirely convinced that the way forward was to educate general practitioners to make more accurate psychiatric diagnoses. What were these diagnoses, except alibis for the doctor to go on prescribing tranquillizers and anti-depressants?

Dr Neil Kessel, having demonstrated the weakness of the link between the psychiatric diagnosis and the psychotropic drug, pointed out that if the general practitioner were to give no more than five minutes psychotherapy each week to all his patients suffering from a psychiatric illness (taking only the most conservative estimate of this number) so much time would be required that general medical services would break down. As one enthusiast after another gave his paper, Professor A. L. Cochrane repeated his request that some effort should be made to gather evidence by randomized controlled trials. The clinicians remained obdurate, their feet planted firmly in the quicksands of their own clinical experience, and said that their drugs were too valuable to permit trials to be carried out to assess their value.

The aim of the symposium was to develop guide-lines and recommendations on the future prescribing and use of these drugs by general practitioners and psychiatrists.

The proceedings of the conference were recorded and will be published later. It is the hope of the Department of Health and Social Security, who sponsored the symposium, that when the proceedings are published they will form the basis of discussion in post-graduate medical centres and in all institutions concerned with the further education of general practitioners and psychiatrists.

Assessment

Primarily, what the symposium achieved was a statement of positions. What it failed to achieve, at least in my view, was any real or meaningful dialogue between the proponents of different points of view. For those of us who were privileged to be invited, the weekend was a fascinating one, but the real work, and the real excitement, should follow from the dialogue which the symposium report is intended to provoke.

Wherever and whenever this dialogue takes place, we must make sure that the voice of the general practitioner is heard loud and clear. The patients for whom he prescribes these drugs may be suffering from illnesses which differ from those seen by psychiatrists, not only in severity, but also in kind. The resemblance of the diagnoses he uses, 'anxiety' and 'depression', to those used by the psychiatrist, may be more apparent than real.

There is need for much more research, and much less opinion, and a greater contribution from general practitioners of the calibre of Peter Parish.

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REFERENCE

Parrish, P. A. (1971). *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners, Supplement No. 4*, 21.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR OF UNDERGRADUATES

After the sixth week of the spring term of 1971 the unmarried female undergraduates at Aberdeen University were sent a postal questionnaire about their sexual behaviour and contraceptive practice and 1,552 (90 per cent) replied. Of these, 684 (44 per cent) had experienced intercourse, 486 in the six-week period preceding the study, of whom 46 per cent had had it more than six times in this period. It was found that 86 per cent of the relationships were with fiancés or steady partners.

Only half of the experienced and a quarter of the inexperienced girls thought that contraceptive advice and materials were adequately available. Contraceptives had not been used by 53 per cent of the students on the first occasion that they had had intercourse. In the previous six-week period 192 girls had intercourse without using a contraceptive—39 per cent of those having sexual relations. The use of contraceptives increased with the frequency of intercourse and the stability of the relationship. During the previous six weeks 30 per cent of those having intercourse were on the 'pill', 38 per cent used the sheath, and 26 per cent relied on the safe period or withdrawal as their most frequent method of contraception.

Sixty-five girls had been pregnant in the past, six were pregnant and 49 thought that they might be.

The uncertainty and difficulty that are experienced in obtaining contraceptives and the large number of occasions on which they are not used are discussed. Moral and pragmatic aspects of promoting a more effective use are examined and better publicity for the Family planning clinics that already exist is urged.

McCance, C. & Hall, D. J. (1972). *British Medical Journal*, 2, 694-700. (Authors' summary).