Atypical Antipsychotic Agents Not Safer or More Effective

A new study published in the New England Journal of Medicine showed that expensive new atypical antipsychotic agents are no more effective nor safer than an older, less expensive drug that has been largely discontinued. The study, conducted by researchers at Columbia University and Yale University and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, showed that a generic drug called perphenazine is as effective and safe as more expensive agents.

The study tracked patients for 18 months, which allowed researchers to compare the effectiveness of the medications as they actually are used. Participants had a variety of complicating factors, as in actual clinical situations, and came from diverse backgrounds. It was the largest, longest, and most comprehensive, independent trial ever conducted to examine existing therapies.

Previous comparisons of antipsychotic agents showed that older agents can cause involuntary muscle movements, and new drugs were heralded for not causing these problems. However, the new study noted that most previous trials had used the highly potent agent Haldol® and showed that perphenazine does not cause the same degree of movement problems. However, researchers noted the drugs are not in competition, and each has benefits and risks. Health care providers must judge what individual patients need.


Medicare Drug Benefits to Change January 1, 2006

In our April and May issues, the Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services reported about new Medicare drug benefits. Now, the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 makes many improvements to Medicare beginning January 1, 2006. All 42 million Medicare beneficiaries will have prescription drug coverage for the first time, and the 6.3 million dually eligible people (almost 40% of whom have serious mental illnesses or cognitive impairments) will receive their prescription medication through Medicare rather than Medicaid.


Autism Researcher Receives Grant

In July 2005, the Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services reported about research conducted by Jennifer Elder, PhD, RN, FAAN, nursing researcher at the University of Florida College of Nursing, about helping fathers better communicate and play with their children with autism. Recently, Elder received a $1.1 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to lead a 4-year study that will further expand training for fathers of children with autism.

The study team plans to include a larger group of fathers and finetune the interventions originally used. They also plan to evaluate the effectiveness of showing fathers how to train their spouses in the techniques, as well as the effects of the training on parental stress and family cohesion.

Dr. Jennifer Elder will help train fathers to communicate and play with their autistic children.

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Training Therapists of Color

An article published in *Family Process* highlights the creation and structure of a training program designed to increase the number of family therapists of color. The authors discuss the first 12 years of the Diversity and Social Work Training Program, implemented by the Ackerman Institute for the Family, to train 57 graduates of color, 27 of whom elected to remain in their program for postgraduate training.

Using a bottom-up approach, the researchers recruited students of color who were still in graduate school and provided them with mentors, financial aid, and emotional support. The recruiting adhered to seven principles, among which were recruiting students before they had completed their graduate studies; mentorships with faculty of color; and provision of a long-term institutional commitment and biracial collaborations.

Computer Savvy Older Adults Experience Less Depression

A study presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association noted that older adults who became competent with computer skills appeared to have fewer symptoms of depression than adults who were not as savvy with technology. The study, Villagers Over 65 Independent Living Challenges and Expectations (VOICES), is sponsored by Village Care of New York (“Villagers” refers to people living in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village). Data regarding computer use and symptoms of depression were collected as part of an ongoing longitudinal study designed to determine changes in physical health, mental health, and social activity of older adults living in lower Manhattan. The sample included 206 adults older than age 65 (mean age = 80).

Kathleen Triche, DSW, CSW, who presented the study’s findings, said that the researchers decided to look into the effect of the growing use of computers by older adults based on the hypothesis that those who used computers would report fewer symptoms of depression than those who did not. Through observations at one of Village Care’s senior information centers in Manhattan, computer use seemed to give older adults a greater connection to the world around them. Researchers also found that computer users tended to be among the younger members of the study group and had higher annual household incomes, while also reporting higher functioning in activities of daily living than the rest of the older adults in the study group.