Child Psychopharmacology Comes of Age

Jan Fawcett, MD

This April edition of Psychiatric Annals, guest edited by Christopher J. Kratochvil, MD, provides a very useful review of the results of studies that form an increasingly firm, data-supported basis for recommendations concerning the psychopharmacologic treatment of children.

The diagnosis and treatment of children with psychiatric disorders has long been a contentious issue. First, there still remains disbelief that children can suffer from actual psychiatric disorders seen in adults that might require medication treatment. The absence of biological tests to “confirm” a psychiatric diagnosis in children raises concerns that any diagnosis is turning normal developmental processes that the child will “grow out of” into pathology.

Second, there is still a reluctance to concede that children can be helped more than hurt by “powerful medications that could have effects on the brain.” This is why we need as much evidence as possible to guide our clinical decisions and our use of psychiatric medications in children and adolescents.

Without data to guide us, we are caught between the “perfect storm” described by Robert Post in urging the early diagnosis and treatment of childhood bipolar disorder in the October issue of Psychiatric Annals [2009(39):10]. We are caught in a quandary of deciding to prescribe powerful mood stabilizers and atypical antipsychotic medications to children and adolescents with significant psychiatric disorders that could possibly be a detriment to their central nervous system and social development at crucial stages. We very much need evidence of safe and positive outcomes to support our treatment decisions.

This issue on Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology provides a contemporary, data-based guide for the practicing clinician that brings us the increasing amounts of clinical findings upon which to base clinical decisions concerning treatment. Although efficacy and safety of various medications are discussed across diagnoses, so, too, is the importance of psychotherapeutic interventions. This is an encouraging series, which brings us up-to-date concerning the treatment evidence but also points out where further clinical studies are needed. Happy spring!

doi: 10.3928/00485713-20100330-04