

Psychotropic medications and the transition into care: a national data linkage study.

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Why are medications in nursing homes important?

There has been on-going international concern about levels of psychotropic drug use in the older population, especially in care homes. These are drugs used to treat psychiatric illnesses including anxiolytics (medications to reduce anxiety), hypnotics (medications to aid sleeping) and antipsychotics (drugs used to treat more significant psychiatric illness). There are on-going concerns that in many instances they are being used to subdue patients. The drugs are not recommended for use in the older population as they can lead to adverse events and in the case of antipsychotic medications can increase risk of death. However, despite a range of warnings, recommendations, and guidelines aimed at ensuring more-appropriate use of these medications, the prevalence of psychotropic drug use in residential care homes and nursing homes remains high.

Research Aim:

To determine whether the prescribing of these medications in care homes is mainly a continuation of a prescribing practice that was commenced in the community or is a feature of entry to a care home.

What did we study?

We linked the health-related records of over 250,000 older people (aged 65 years and over) living in NI from 2008 to 2010. This enabled us to study the levels of prescribing for people who remained in the community over this period, those who moved into care homes and to compare these levels against patients who resided in care homes. We were also able to study the effect of transition into care.

What did we find out?

This study confirmed that psychotropic drug use was higher in care homes than the community; for example, at any point in time about 20% of those in care homes were dispensed an antipsychotic, compared with 1% of those in the community. However, it also proved that the high use of psychotropic drugs observed in care homes in Northern Ireland cannot wholly be explained by a continuation of high use initiated in the community prior to entering care. Although drug dispensing for older people in the community about to enter a care home is high, it increases dramatically on entry to care. There is something about care homes that increases the likelihood of being prescribed an anxiolytic, hypnotic and antipsychotic medication. The sharp increase in the prescribing of psychotropic drug on entry to care (and in the following 6 months) suggests that interventions to reduce drug initiation should target this critical period. Routine medicines reviews are necessary in older people and are especially important during transitions into care.

Why is this important?

The number of older people entering care is predicted to increase in forthcoming years and with a globally ageing population, it is vitally important that we look at the reasons behind the increase in the prescription of psychotropic drugs in care homes.