

PHARMAC

Pharmaceutical Management Agency

Media release

Prescribing of all antidepressants continues to rise

Prescribing of SSRI antidepressants to teenagers and adults is continuing to rise, figures released by government drug-funding agency PHARMAC today show.

The figures, for the year to June 2004, show that in the latest financial year, approximately 2600 people aged 6-18 were taking the group of drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. A further 830 patients were taking the older type antidepressants, predominantly the tricyclic antidepressants.

Prescription numbers for SSRIs increased by 12 percent in 2002, and 20 percent in 2003, but that rate of increase slowed to 5.3 percent in 2004.

About 3400 people aged 6-19 were taking antidepressants in the 2004 year. Overall, about 210,000 people of all ages were prescribed all types of antidepressants in the last year.

The Ministry of Health has issued new advice to doctors and is requiring warnings on all antidepressants to indicate possible increased suicide risk and the need to closely monitor patients with depression. The Ministry is acting on advice from a specialist medical committee that when treating children and adolescents with depression the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviour with SSRIs generally outweighs the possible benefits from the medication. Datasheets for tricyclic antidepressants will also be updated to say the medicines are not recommended for use in patients under 18 years of age unless upon the advice of an appropriate specialist.

PHARMAC Medical Director Dr Peter Moodie says the number of young people taking antidepressants is increasing, but at a slower rate than in previous years.

“Up until the 2003 financial year, there had been a rapid growth in the number of young people prescribed SSRIs, but this rate of increase had slowed in the past year,” Dr Moodie says.

“Combined with this slowing trend with SSRIs, the numbers of young people taking older tricyclic antidepressants rose 16 percent in the last year.”

“We need to remember that there have been a couple of confounding factors in the past year, including the introduction of PHOs. This may mean that PHARMAC is capturing more data on the use of less expensive medicines, such as the tricyclic antidepressants.”

Dr Moodie says PHARMAC will be looking more closely at the prescribing figures and providing information to clinical groups on the variation in antidepressant prescribing around the country.

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