Behavioral Therapy Shown to Delay Initiation of ADHD Medication

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT
San Francisco Bureau

PHOENIX — Using behavioral interventions for children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may delay the initiation of ADHD medication, a study presented at a meeting of the American Academy of Family Physicians said.

The study found that children who received behavioral therapy before pharmacotherapy were less likely to start taking ADHD medication than those who received medication first.

In the study, children with ADHD were randomized to receive either behavioral therapy or medication as the first treatment. Those who received behavioral therapy were less likely to start taking medication, even when they had similar severity of symptoms at the start of the study.

The authors concluded that behavioral therapy may be a viable alternative to medication for some children with ADHD, and that it could delay the need for medication in some cases.

Suicide Alert Skewed Antidepressant Scripts

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PHOENIX — The proportion of clinic visits to psychiatrists involving antidepressants for youths fell compared with the proportion of visits to primary care physicians after the black box warning linking antidepressants to suicide in youths.

However, visits by adults to psychiatrists did not change by specialty during the same period — suggesting that the Food and Drug Administration’s suicide warning of 2004 caused the change in pediatric prescribing.

Results of an analysis of data from the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey seem to show that the FDA warning “had a greater impact on the prescribing of antidepressants to youth by psychiatrists than by primary care physicians,” Julie M. Zito, Ph.D., said at a poster presentation at a meeting of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

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In 2003, 31% of visits by youths to PCPs were for antidepressants, versus 42% in 2004 and 45% in 2005.

In each year, the proportion of visits by adults, in comparison, changed relatively little by specialty, with visits to psychiatrists for antidepressants comprising 21% in 2003 and 20% in 2005. Primary care physicians handled 54% of adult visits for antidepressants in 2003 and 53% in 2005. Other specialties covered 22% of adult visits for antidepressants in 2003 and 22% in 2005.

The proportion of visits by youths to psychiatrists was larger than the share of antidepressant prescriptions for adults to psychiatrists.

Children with ADHD who were on antidepressants had higher rates of suicide attempts than those on ADHD medication alone.

Children who had an enteroivirus 71 infection had higher rates of ADHD symptoms, according to a study presented at a meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The findings have “clearly demonstrated the association between the EV71 CNS infection and increased symptoms of inattention, oppositional defiant/behavioral problems, and increased likelihood of ADHD diagnosis,” said Dr. Susan Shur-Fen Gau of National Taiwan University, Taipei, and her associates.

The results also support their belief that children who have had an EV71 CNS infection “are more likely to have ADHD-related symptoms, regardless of IQ” (Pediatrics 2008;122:e432-8).

The study used standardized mother- and teacher-rated scales to evaluate ADHD symptoms and other emotional and behavioral problems in 51 boys and 35 girls aged 4-16 years who had had an EV71 CNS infection at the mean age of 2.5 years, and in 172 controls who were matched for gender, age, school performance, and parental education levels.

In the children with the infections, CNS involvement had been mild in 42 cases (aspecific meningitis) and severe in 35 cases (encephalitis, poliomielitislike syndrome, or encephalomyelitis); the other 9 children had cardiopulmonary failure after CNS involvement.

The children had been diagnosed with the infections from 1998 to 2003 at Chang Gung Children’s Hospital, Taoyuan, Taiwan, and National Taiwan University Hospital. There was an epidemic of EV71 infection in Taiwan in 1998.

Scores on teacher- and mother-rated scales of inattention, hyperactivity-impulsivity, oppositional symptoms, and ADHD index were significantly higher in those with the EV71 infection, compared with controls.

In the former group, 20% had elevated ADHD-related symptoms, compared with 3% of controls, a significant difference.

The researchers said that maternal reports provided some evidence that children with the EV71 CNS infections had more internalizing problems, but that that needs to be studied further.

There was no correlation between the age at which the child had the infection, any laboratory data, or the severity of CNS involvement with the severity of ADHD-related symptoms, a finding, the researchers said was surprising. They speculated that the infection may involve the preferential striatum-subcortical area of the brain, or another area that is related to the core symptoms of ADHD.

They cited the inability to assess ADHD symptoms in the children before the CNS infection as one of the study’s limitations and said more studies were needed to confirm whether the increase in ADHD symptoms was specific to EV71 or also occurred with other microorganisms.

Nevertheless, they concluded that an EV71 CNS infection “may affect long-term regulation of attention and emotion and cause hyperactivity-impulsivity in children” and recommended children with these infections be assessed early to identify and treat ADHD symptoms and emotional and behavioral problems.

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