Data Limited on Pharmacotherapy for Autism

BY JEFF EVANS
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NEW YORK — The body of data for using newer pharmacotherapeutic agents to treat autistic symptoms is relatively limited, and some current treatments have been shown to be effective only to varying degrees in small studies.

At the recent American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry annual meeting here, Shreya Davé, a research fellow in the department of primary care and public health at Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Conn, presented a cross-sectional study of medication patterns in patients with autism or pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) in North Carolina. The use of any medication to treat the conditions rose from 31% in 1992-1993 to 45% in 2001, even though data do not exist to support the use of many medications, Davé noted.

One of the reasons is the relative lack of data on the safety and efficacy of medications for autism. “Until recently, methylphenidate had been studied in only two trials of 10 children with PDD and ADHD,” Davé said. “If it is addressed proactively, Ms. Davé said, paternal depression is a treatable condition.

PATERNAL DEPRESSION

Quebec City — Paternal depression is relatively common, and can negatively affect child behavior, Shreya Davé reported at the annual meeting of the North American Primary Care Research Group.

A clear link has been established between paternal depression and impaired social development of children. But little is known about paternal depression and its effects. Ms. Davé presented a cross-sectional study in which questionnaires were sent to 2,352 biological fathers with children aged 4-6 years who were identified from 13 general practices in greater London and Hertfordshire, England.

Questionnaires included a diagnostic depression measure (Patient Health Questionnaire) and standardized inventories on child behavior (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), parenting, couple relationship, alcohol use, and demographics.

 Fathers were sent a similar but smaller packet. Their responses were used to assess child behavior and were thought to be a more objective way to assess the relationship of paternal depression and child behavior, said Ms. Davé, a research fellow in the department of primary care and population sciences at University College London.

The prevalence of paternal depression was 8% in the study, with 29 of the 365 fathers who responded scoring positively for depressive symptoms.

Of the 365 responders, 12 (3%) fathers had major depressive symptoms and 17 (5%) had mild or moderate depressive symptoms.

Directions

What is the best way to assess child behavior? How can such assessments help in treating symptoms of autism? What are the limitations of current treatment options for autism? How can paternal depression be addressed proactively?

New data are needed to better understand the relationship between paternal depression and child behavior, and to develop effective interventions.

But the findings clearly point to the need for further studies.

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—Patrice Wendl