

Canadian children drugged in record numbers; Atypical antipsychotics lead to complications

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So many Canadian children are taking the drugs known as atypical antipsychotics that doctors are being asked to watch for major complications - including dramatic weight gain, tremors, and abnormal face and jaw movements.

Once reserved for schizophrenia and mania in adults, one antipsychotic alone, risperidone, was recommended by Canadian-office-based doctors for children 17 and younger a total of 340,670 times in 2010 - a near-doubling since 2006 - according to data provided to Postmedia News from prescription-drug tracking firm IMS Brogan.

The increase in prescriptions for children as young as six is raising concerns that the drugs are being overused.

Some experts say too little is known about the effects on a child's cognitive, social and physical development, and that the side effects may set children up for serious health problems later in life.

These concerns were the driving force behind the creation of the world's first clinic to help children cope with the side effects of such medications at BC Children's Hospital in April.

Dr. Jana Davidson, a child and adolescent psychiatrist who helped establish the specialized clinic, said in an interview that children taking such medications have an increased risk of developing pre-diabetes, high cholesterol levels and obesity, compared to other children not taking the medication.

In B.C., where 5,000 kids are believed to be taking antipsychotic medication, children newly prescribed the drugs or those already experiencing side effects can be referred to the clinic. They receive coaching from a physiotherapist about the need to be more physically active, nutrition advice from a dietitian, nursing care and treatment from a psychiatrist and endocrinologist.

"We are really grateful we were able to get funding from the Provincial Health Services Authority to open this clinic. We've seen 79 kids under the age of 18 so far and we already have a four-week wait list which we want to get down to three," said Davidson. Davidson said she helped create the clinic because of her increasing alarm over the side effects of treatment in her patients. While she believes the medications are sometimes prescribed inappropriately, they are often useful for a range of disorders including severe aggression, mania in bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. But the side effects can be serious.

"I would see kids with psychosis in the emergency department and then I would see them again 10 months later and they would be 30 to 50 pounds heavier," she said.

Not all doctors are aware they can refer their pediatric patients to the clinic so Davidson acknowledged there's still lots of work to do in getting the word out.

Overall, from 2005 to 2009, antipsychotic-drug recommendations for children and youth in Canada increased 114 per cent, according to new guidelines published in this month's issue of the journal *Pediatrics & Child Health* on the use of second-generation atypical antipsychotics in children and youth.

The drugs - which have not been approved in Canada for use in children under 18 - are being used for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorders, irritability related to autism, mood disorders, physical or verbal aggression and other behavioural problems. Doctors say that for many desperate families, the drugs are often the only option because of a dismal lack of access to non-drug therapy for children in crisis.

"By no means are these medications a cure for problems," said Calgary neurologist Tamara Pringsheim. However, "if you can diminish a patient's symptoms by 50 per cent, we consider that helpful."

Many of the drugs can cause neurological side effects that include restlessness and a constant need to move; a decrease in facial expression or a "mask-like" face; abnormal movements of the face, mouth, lips, jaw or tongue; drug-induced tremors and abnormal muscle movements, including neck stretching and writhing.

Before agreeing to put their child on an antipsychotic, experts say parents should ask the doctor what specific symptoms the drug is targeting, and whether there are other options.

More information about B.C. Children's Hospital's metabolic clinic can be found at: kellymentalhealth.ca/partner/provincial-mental-health-metabolicprogram

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