

LETTERS TO EDITOR

schizophrenic patients who do not respond to other medications; however, such patients are often poorly compliant with treatment regimes. We present a situation in which family members of a noncompliant patient resorted to a novel if unorthodox method for the administration of clozapine.

CASE HISTORY

Mr. S, a 30-year-old male, was brought with a 6-year history of delusions of persecution, auditory hallucinations, volatile mood swings, and deterioration in functional abilities. He had failed previous trials of haloperidol, pimozide, flupenthixol, and risperidone. These drugs had been given in adequate doses for adequate periods of time, and compliance had been ensured by the use of depot preparations of haloperidol and flupenthixol. Antidepressant and benzodiazepine drugs had also been unsuccessfully added to the medication regime at various points in time.

The family refused a trial of electroconvulsive therapy. In view of the clear treatment-refractoriness, clozapine was advised. After approximately a month of treatment, by which time a dose of 200mg/day was attained, there was moderate attenuation of psychotic symptoms; however, the patient refused to continue treatment any further because he insisted that he had recovered completely and that he could remain well on will power alone.

His family did not wish to lose the gains that had accrued with the introduction of clozapine. They therefore crushed the tablets and administered the powder in his food. However, despite the serving of the medication along with rice, fish curry, and other preparations, the patient perceived an odd taste in his meals. He began to suspect, and rightly so, that medication was being added to his food. He therefore insisted upon eating only chappatis as the staple element of his meals.

As a last resort, the family administered the crushed and powdered tablets, nightly, along with scrambled eggs, with salt and pepper added

THE SURREPTITIOUS ADMINISTRATION OF CLOZAPINE: CRITICAL ISSUES

Sir,

Clozapine is a useful drug for

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to taste. The strong taste of the egg, along with the spicing, effectively masked the taste of clozapine.

One and a half years have elapsed since the inception of this novel method of administration of clozapine, and the patient continues to maintain the improvement that he had initially shown.

DISCUSSION

This case highlights four important issues:

1. Scrambled egg, along with salt and pepper, effectively masks the taste of clozapine. This, therefore, is a practical method for the surreptitious administration of medication to a noncompliant patient.

2. The above notwithstanding, it is unethical and illegal to treat a patient without his knowledge; this holds true even when the family members of the patient themselves undertake the responsibility for the act. Legally, an unwilling patient can be treated against his will only if committed to psychiatric care through appropriate judicial processes.

3. It is particularly wrong to surreptitiously treat patients with clozapine because blood monitoring for granulocytopenia and agranulocytosis becomes difficult to effect. Current recommendations are that patients be monitored weekly for the initial 6 months, and once in two weeks thereafter (Physicians Desk Reference, 1999). In the case of the present patient, the family took a calculated risk against medical advice, weighing the approximately 0.5% risk of agranulocytosis against the benefits afforded by clozapine.

4. That the family readily obtained clozapine without a medical prescription is an damning indictment of the system of drug availability in the country. There is a pressing need for greater ethical practice amongst pharmaceutical dispensers.

Interestingly, the surreptitious administration of clozapine has been reported from other countries as well (Pereira et al., 1999). The practice of administering medication in food

and drink may be widespread in settings such as long stay facilities for the elderly (Treolar et al., 2000). In this contest, Treolar et al. (2001) discussed ethical and related issues, and suggested recommendations on the subject.

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