

PE1651/PPP

Janette Robb submission of 28 December 2017

Thank you for the chance to make a second submission to this petition.

I hope it is not inappropriate to take this opportunity to highlight the plight of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders? [ASD].

Autism and Asperger syndrome are not mental illnesses, though challenging and self-injurious behaviour, stress, extreme anxiety and depression can take them into the realm of mental health. Unfortunately many people with an ASD have deficiencies in key detoxification pathways and cannot efficiently metabolise toxins, which of course must include prescription medication. Drug concentration can quickly rise to toxic levels making them vulnerable to increased incidence of side effects [some of which can be bizarre and even dangerous] and of course exaggerated withdrawal problems. But you don't need to be diagnosed with an ASD to have problems with processing medication. The elderly, the young and those with unidentified susceptibilities are all at risk.

According to Professor Tony Attwood, misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatments can occur in 57% of those late-diagnosed with and ASD. [Tony Attwood is a clinical psychologist known world-wide for his knowledge of Asperger syndrome.]

It's not uncommon for people with an ASD to hit a period of depression, leading to prescription of antidepressants, usually an SSRI. [e.g. Prozac or Seroxat] Side effects of SSRIs and withdrawal syndromes in the wider population are well documented on the Internet. How much worse might they be for people on the autism spectrum? - especially for children and adolescents? Side effects, amongst others, include feelings of suicidality, mania and psychosis. Warning of severe side effects, the Cochrane Collaboration advises very much against prescribing these drugs to children with an ASD, but notes that a few adults have been helped. A study done at Utah University in 2002, found that over 8% of psychiatric hospital admissions were suffering from antidepressant-induced psychosis and mania.

UK government figures in 2006 showed more than 84,000 children and teenagers were prescribed drugs such as Seroxat and Prozac in 2004-2005. This was despite the fact that "...experts said SSRI antidepressants should not be given to teenagers after experts' concerns stated they made some patients suicidal". Dr Peter Breggin found that "Adverse behavioral effects tend to show up more frequently and severely in children, providing a magnified view of the same or similar effects that the drugs are causing on adults."

There is no doubt stress and anxiety are huge in autism spectrum disorders. Short term, benzodiazepines might bring relief, but cannot be used long-term. In fact long-term use of any psychiatric drug could result in delirium which, it appears, is not well recognised. Up to two thirds of cases are missed. Untreated, delirium can cause permanent brain damage or even death. Delirium is an organically caused confusional state which results in '.... perceptual deficits, altered sleep-wake cycle, and psychotic features such as hallucinations and delusions'.

These events can – and do - all too easily lead to patients being misdiagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar, or some other serious mental disorder and be erroneously medicated. Lives are being devastated, families torn apart and, should personal suffering not be a priority, it's costing the country a fortune and will continue to do so unless action is taken. Education and awareness within the health service and social care services for autistic persons, are desperately needed.

To complicate matters further, people with an ASD can have underlying conditions which may manifest as mental illnesses. Epilepsy, hypothyroidism, metabolic and mitochondrial problems can give rise to psychiatric symptoms. Before prescribing long-term medication, wouldn't it be wise to carry out a full examination and a battery of tests, to make sure that unusual behaviours are not the result of an underlying medical condition which the patient may not be able to describe?

Human beings are all different. It's not a case of 'one size fits all' - especially where autism is concerned. As happens at present, parents should not have to depend on the expertise and knowledge of online support groups – which is extensive it must be said.

Perhaps the advent of DNA testing in UK could save lives, and a lot of unnecessary suffering – not to mention cost to the country?