

Psychopharmacological treatment in elderly patients referred to a Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry service

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Introduction

Psychiatric disorders in hospitalized elderly patients currently reach rates of 50-60% [1], depressive episodes and organic mental disorders such as delirium and dementia being the most frequent diagnoses [2]. These disorders increase the risk for morbidity and mortality, as well as prolong the length of hospital stays [3]. For this reason, an appropriate psychopharmacological treatment is essential, which must be carefully chosen, based on psychiatric pathology, somatic co-morbidity and the pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic changes characteristic of elderly patients [4]. Despite the importance of the stated above, research into the use of psychotropic drugs focused on the elderly is still scarce.

Aim

The main objective of this study is to describe the psychopharmacological treatment used in a sample of hospitalized elderly people referred to the Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry (CLP) service of the University Clinical Hospital of Barcelona (Spain).

Methods

Longitudinal observational and descriptive study of patients admitted to a general hospital (in non-psychiatric units), for medical or surgical pathology, who presented psychiatric symptoms, and who were referred to our CLP service for evaluation, diagnosis and treatment. We used a standardized computerized clinical database. The period analyzed was 3 years (from January 1, 2011 through December 31, 2013). A descriptive analysis of the following variables was performed: age, sex, medical pathology, psychiatric diagnoses, sources (medical specialties), reasons for referral and psychopharmacological intervention.

Results

Demographic and clinical characteristics:

During the period studied, 2,945 psychiatric consultations were referred to our CLP service. Of these consultations 1017 (35%) corresponded to patients 65 years of age or older. The average age was 75.73 ± 6.5 years and 51.1% of them were female. A 53.4% had previous psychiatric history.

Sources and psychiatric diagnoses:

The services that most referred to CLP were: Surgical specialties (25.9%), Cardiology-respiratory medicine (20.1%) and general medicine (17.9%). The most frequent psychiatric disorders were: delirium and dementia (43.9%), adjustment disorders (18%) and mood disorders (13.7%).

Psychopharmacological intervention:

The percentage of patients that needed treatment with psychotropic drugs after psychiatric assessment was 85%. The main psychotropic drugs used were: Antipsychotics 44% (being second-generation antipsychotics the most frequently used, in 91% of the cases); antidepressants 30% (being selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors the most frequently used, in 72% of the cases), and benzodiazepines and psychostimulants 7%.

Conclusions

The referral rate of elderly patients admitted to medical-surgical services referred to our CLP unit was high. In this group of patients, the use of psychotropic drugs was higher than in elderly outpatients, which has been described as 10-25% [5]. The prescription of antipsychotics and antidepressants was very common, which could be explained by the frequent presence of organic mental disorders (delirium and dementia) and depressive episodes within this age group. It is necessary to emphasize that the high use of psychopharmacological drugs in hospitalized elderly population makes it essential to have broad knowledge of their side effects and interactions with other treatments commonly used in medicine.

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