

Banned depression tablets are still being prescribed to thousands of children

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Banned antidepressants are being handed out to thousands of children by doctors because they face waits of up to 10 months to see a psychiatrist.

Family doctors have revealed that they are forced to hand out "happy pills" to children as young as 13 suffering depression while they languish on waiting lists to see specialists, despite serious safety concerns of doing so.

The antidepressant Seroxat and similar drugs, called SSRIs, were restricted for children's use by the Government's medicines' watchdog in 2003 after an investigation revealed that they could cause mood swings and increase the risk of suicide in under-18s.

Only one drug, Prozac, was deemed by the Medicines and Health care Products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) to be safe to give to children, but only as a last resort.

But a survey of 1,300 general practitioners has found that the crisis in mental health services for children is so bad that they have little alternative but to put youngsters on antidepressants, including Seroxat and other SSRIs.



Almost 7,000 under-18s are prescribed Seroxat

Four out of five GPs say they are unable to meet guidelines from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence, which recommends advice on diet and exercise and counselling as a first line of treatment for mild to moderate depression. More than half - 58 per cent - are instead handing out antidepressants to plug the gap left by poor NHS services.

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The survey, carried out by the medical magazine Pulse, found children and adolescents face huge problems in getting treatment for depression.

Under-18s typically have to wait eight months for assessment by their local child and adolescent mental health services team and 10 months to see a child psychiatrist. Dr Heather Potter, from Neath, said: "It takes tremendous courage to seek help, and then they get stuck on a waiting list."

The ban on SSRIs followed concerns that the antidepressants could cause children to attempt suicide. One of the cases that sparked fears was that of Adrian Keegan, 19, who had been taking the drug for 26 days when he committed suicide. In 2001, following the breakdown of his relationship with his girlfriend, he was diagnosed with depression and prescribed Seroxat by his GP. His father Christopher found his body

hanging in his flat.

Mr Keegan, from Market Drayton, Shropshire, said: "There needs to be more information and better control as it is given out far too easily, like sweets."

Sharise Gatchell, 18, took her own life just days before GPs in Britain were banned from prescribing Seroxat to children.

She was first given the drug at 16 but, when her personality changed and she began to harm herself, was taken off it. She secretly began taking Seroxat two years later to help to combat her depression and, after 17 days, hanged herself. Her mother Stephanie, 44, from Newhaven, East Sussex, said: "Words cannot describe what we've been going through."

Although the Royal College of GPs has signed up to guidance from the MHRA and Nice, the guidance is not legally binding. GPs are still free to use their discretion when prescribing and the survey reveals that many are doing so because the alternative is to leave depressed youngsters without help.

The college's chairman, Dr Mayur Lakhani, said: "If you don't have the support services you can get in a situation where inappropriate prescribing can occur. Talking therapies must be made more widely available, in the meantime I would urge GPs to follow the latest clinical guidelines."

Latest official figures show that almost 7,000 prescriptions for Seroxat and 10,000 for other SSRIs were issued to under-18s in 2004-5. An increasing number of children are on Prozac.

Campaigners last night said that action was needed to prevent children being treated with "chemical cosh" drugs rather than therapies such as counselling. Sophie Corlett, the policy director at mental health charity Mind, said: "A child in crisis should not be waiting 10 months for access to a psychiatrist. The Government must commit more money to these services."

A Department of Health spokesman said £300 million had been invested in children's mental health services in the past three years.