

Sunderland's depressing drugs toll

By [Marissa Carruthers](#)

Published on Mon Dec 27 2010

DOCTORS are dishing out more than 800 prescriptions a day for antidepressants, as Wearsiders struggle to cope with the credit crunch.

Figures obtained by the Echo reveal doling out the drugs cost £1.4million across Sunderland last year alone.

Health chiefs today blamed the rise in the number of people seeking depression-tackling drugs on the economic climate, leading to redundancies, cuts in income and strained relationships.

Washington Mind has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people referred to them for help during the last three years.

Since April, 687 have sought support from the charity, compared with 221 in 2007/08.

"More people are coming to us with issues directly relating to the recession," said Jacqui Reeves, of Washington Mind.

"Typically, they are telling us of work-related and relationship issues and financial difficulties, alongside deterioration in physical health, sleep problems, problematic alcohol and prescription drug use, and often with unhealthy violence and domestic violence."

Figures showed that the three most prescribed antidepressants were citalopram (also used for panic attacks); amitriptyline hydrochloride (which can also be given to bed-wetting children); and Fluoxetine, commonly known as prozac (also used to treat obsessive compulsive disorder and bulimia).

In addition, data revealed the most antidepressant prescriptions were handed out in Castletown, Southwick, Hetton, Millfield and Houghton.

Despite the rise in numbers on Wearside, Sunderland health chiefs said people suffering from depression are not always prescribed drugs and can often be treated using a series of alternative therapies, including being referred to charities like Mind to offer counselling and support.

Janette Stephenson is head of commissioning medicines management at NHS South of Tyne and Wear, which covers Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust.

She said: "The treatment of depression can involve a number of remedies, including counselling and interpersonal therapy, and antidepressants are not prescribed for every case.

"Different antidepressants work in a variety of ways; the most common group are termed selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors, which increase the level of a chemical called serotonin in the brain – low levels of this chemical have been associated with the symptoms of depression.

"Doctors will decide whether to prescribe an antidepressant depending on the patients' symptoms and severity of illness.

"National Institute of Clinical Excellence guidance recommends that mild depression is usually best treated by monitoring the patient and psychological approaches including talking therapies.

“Antidepressants are usually used for moderate to severe forms of the illness, often in association with psychological therapies.”

Patients referred to Mind have access to a series of additional therapeutic sessions, including one-to-one talks, group sessions and self-help exercises.

Ms Reeves added: “Services that deliver therapeutic interventions like ourselves have the luxury of spending up to an hour with the people we see. GPs often only have 10 to 15 minutes.

“Medication is often an appropriate treatment but it has its drawbacks, such as the side-effects or a diminished efficiency over time.”

Mind will also be launching a new Improved Access to Psychological Therapies service in 2011, to offer additional support to people suffering from anxiety and depression.

For more information or to request a copy of Washington Mind’s Wellbeing Guide, phone 417 8043.