

Expert speaks out over Seroxat

A child psychiatrist has spoken out against the continuing practice of giving Seroxat to children, which has been against guidance since 2003.

It follows the campaign of Sussex mother Stephanie Gatchell whose teenage daughter Sharise killed herself while taking the anti-depressant.

Clinicians can still prescribe the drug to children if they can justify it, consultant Dr Richard Soppitt said.

But the Kent specialist said he would not prescribe the drug himself.

Dr Soppitt said a serious side effect that had been found when children were given Seroxat was increased suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks of taking the drug.

DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN

There is probably one depressed child in every secondary school classroom

One in three adolescents have suicidal thoughts

But he added that while suicidal thoughts grew with taking the medicine, it was not proven that the actual suicide rate increased.

The manufacturer, GlaxoSmithKline, states Seroxat is not for use in children under 18.

And guidelines came in as early as 2003 advising doctors not to give Seroxat to children, reaffirmed by further guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Nice), two years later.

But this year, it was revealed that nearly 7,000 prescriptions for Seroxat were handed out to under-18s in 2004/05.

Waiting lists

Dr Soppitt said some of those cases would be patients who were already established on the medication, or those who were finding it difficult to stop taking it.

He said it was likely that the figure was "driven by those previously prescribed it, or those who can't get off it".

But he said it was also reasonable to assume the figure included new prescriptions, which he said was cause for concern.

PREVENTION AND FIRST POINTS OF CALL

Establish correct sleep patterns

Have a healthy diet and regular exercise

Find help through school counselling services

Find ways to improve self esteem

Family stability is an important preventative factor

"On face value there seems to be a problem," he said.

Criticisms of waiting lists have come from mental health charity Mind which claims a lack of investment has led to youngsters being given drugs including Seroxat instead of therapies such as counselling.

The charity said: "GPs are advised to refer children experiencing depression for therapy, but the waiting lists for this are very long in many areas, leaving doctors with little to offer but medication."

Dr Soppitt said: "Children represent 24% of the population.

"In terms of mental health spending on children, it gets under 5% of the mental health budget.

"It is traditionally represented as a Cinderella service, although the government has committed additional resources, but it still remains relatively under-funded."

He said the first stage in treating a depressed child should be "talking cures" such as counselling and other therapies, while anti-depressants could only be prescribed to children by an expert, or a GP if they could show additional expertise.

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