

Parents 'bully' GPs into prescribing antidepressants for children

By JENNY HOPE Last updated at 09:06am on 17th November 2006



There has been a sharp rise in the number of teenagers with mental health problems since 2001.

Parents are "bullying" GPs into prescribing antidepressants for their children, according to a new survey.

Family doctors claim "very poor" NHS services are also forcing them to give drugs like Prozac when counselling would be better for depressed children.

The survey shows GPs have seen a sharp rise in the number of teenagers with mental health problems since 2001.

Two out of three family doctors have seen an increase in cases, with the most commonly diagnosed problems being teenage depression, self-harm and eating disorders.

The Norwich Union Healthcare report says over a third of GPs feel under pressure from parents to prescribe antidepressants to their children.

Over half rate local services available to treat children as "very poor" which means they have to use the prescribing pad.

Doctors are advised not to prescribe the majority of antidepressants, known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) to children, although they may still use Prozac.

A ban was brought in on using most SSRIs in under-18s by Government health chiefs almost three years ago because of fears over harmful side-effects, when the number of prescriptions had risen to 170,000.

Late year guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) said children should be offered psychological therapy for depression, with pills only used for those who do not respond.

It is estimated that 40,000 children and adolescents are currently taking antidepressants - with half receiving no psychological support.

Around one in 10 young people suffers some form of mental illness, although there has been concern that some children who are just unhappy have been labelled as depressed - leading to thousands getting drugs which may increase the risk of suicidal behaviour.

Marjorie Wallace, chief executive of leading mental health charity SANE, said: "While in some cases there may be a need for medication as part of the treatment plan, antidepressants should not be treated as a quick-fix solution.

"Teenage mental health problems need to be tackled at the root by making therapy more widely available by examining the causes and by encouraging better awareness amongst the teenagers themselves, parents, teachers and GPs."

Dr Sam Timimi, a consultant child psychiatrist in Lincolnshire, has consistently called for an end to "scandalous" over-prescribing.

He said parents were not wholly to blame, as GPs' training was about trying to solve patients' problems rather than a "wait and see" approach.

He said: "But we should be questioning a culture where a quick fix is needed to deal with life's ups and downs.

"It's true there can be long waits for counselling, anything from 10 weeks to a year depending on where you live, and access should be improved.

"However the wider issue is how do we help children to become resilient to life's knocks if we are automatically offer a pill or counselling when they encounter them," he said.

The survey questioned a panel of 250 GPs and 1,300 parents to investigate the growing problem of teen mental health.

Three out of five doctors have seen an increase in mental health conditions such as depression, self-harm, eating disorders and psychosis.

Nearly two-thirds of parents said they'd seen a rise in the number of teenage mental health problems since they themselves were young.

One in four parents with experience of the NHS in treating children with mental health problems rated the service as poor or very poor.

Nine out of 10 parents said not enough is being done by the NHS to tackle the issue.

Dr Doug Wright, clinical spokesperson for Norwich Union Healthcare, said: "The clear message from GPs and parents is that there are increasing problems with our children's mental health.

"There is dissatisfaction with the current provision of services and a concern that drugs are being used more often.

"The findings support the call for more awareness generally and we urge parents of teenagers in particular to be alert to the issues so they can support their children."