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Prescriptions with potential drug interactions dispensed at Swedish pharmacies in January 1999: cross sectional study

Juan Merlo, Hans Liedholm, Ulf Lindblad, Agneta Björck-Linné, Jürgen Fält, Gunnar Lindberg, Arne Melander

The growing use of pharmacological agents means that drug interactions are of increasing interest for public health. Monitoring of potential drug interactions may improve the quality of drug prescribing and dispensing, and it might form a basis for education focused on appropriate prescribing.

Participants, methods, and results

In a cross sectional study, we analysed all prescriptions (n = 962 013) involving two or more drugs dispensed to the Swedish population (n = 7 214 599; age range 15-95) from all Swedish pharmacies (n = 885) in January 1999. The data were taken from the Swedish healthcare database on pharmaceutical agents, which records all prescriptions dispensed at all of the pharmacies in Sweden. Strict registration routines and internal controls support the accuracy of the database.

Data were stratified by age and sex, and odds ratios were calculated using multilevel logistic regression. Potential drug interactions were classified according to clinical relevance (types A, B, C, and D) and documented evidence (types 1, 2, 3, and 4)—for example, subtype D4 indicates an interaction with greater clinical relevance than that classified as subtype A1 (figure). Of the 962 013 prescriptions dispensed by pharmacies, 130 765 (13.6%) included at least one potential drug interaction. The number of potential drug interactions increased with the patient's age and was greater in women than men (relative risk 0.88; 95% confidence interval 0.85 to 0.92).

Prevalence of potential drug-drug interaction subtypes among 962 013 prescriptions containing two or more drugs dispensed to patients aged 15-95 from Swedish pharmacies in January 1999.

After adjusting for the number of drugs dispensed, we found that combinations of drugs with potential interactions may have serious clinical consequences (type D) were less likely to be prescribed to women than men (relative risk 0.88; 95% confidence interval 0.85 to 0.92).

Of the potential type D interactions, 2358 were between potassium supplements and potassium sparing diuretics—a combination that may result in severe and even life threatening hyperkalaemia. The combination of warfarin dispensed with a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (subtype D4), which can increase the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding due to gastric mucosal damage by the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug and the anticoagulant effect of warfarin, was found on 644 occasions.


Dextropropoxyphene was dispensed with alprazolam on 261 occasions (this combination may cause serious clinical consequences (type D) was low (1.4%), serious and potentially fatal drug interactions—for example, NSAID and warfarin, potassium supplements and potassium sparing diuretics, dextropropoxyphene and carbamazepine, and cisapride and fluconazole—were detected. The risk of interactions with cisapride was known in 1996, and cisapride, which is still available in Sweden, is being withdrawn in many countries.

Prescribing pairs of drugs with potential interactions increases the risk of, but need not lead to, an adverse reaction. Many drug interactions are susceptible to control by dose adjustment; moreover, some are beneficial and are exploited in therapeutics.

National monitoring of potential drug interactions in Sweden is feasible. Differences in healthcare systems need to be considered when extrapolating the results of this study to other countries.

Comment

Although the percentage of potential drug interactions that may have serious clinical consequences (type D) was low (1.4%), serious and potentially fatal drug interactions—for example, NSAID and warfarin, potassium supplements and potassium sparing diuretics, dextropropoxyphene and carbamazepine, and cisapride and fluconazole—were detected. The risk of interactions with cisapride was known in 1996, and cisapride, which is still available in Sweden, is being withdrawn in many countries.

Prescribing pairs of drugs with potential interactions increases the risk of, but need not lead to, an adverse reaction. Many drug interactions are susceptible to control by dose adjustment; moreover, some are beneficial and are exploited in therapeutics.

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Rationing in the NHS: audit of outcome and acceptance of restriction criteria for minor operations

Ciaran P O’Boyle, Richard P Cole

General practitioners’ referrals for skin lesion excisions constitute a large proportion of cases seen at plastic surgery clinics. Escalating rates of skin cancer have increased the numbers of urgent referrals due to suspicious-looking skin lesions. As a result, patients with clinically benign lesions spend long periods on waiting lists, exceeding the waiting times agreed in negotiated contracts.

In March 1999, a total of 666 patients had been waiting over one year for minor plastic surgery at Salisbury District Hospital. In response, Salisbury Health Care NHS Trust and Wiltshire Health Authority proposed a new system of contract exclusions, whereby only patients with lesions that suggested malignancy or that were disfiguring or potentially disfiguring would be seen. The health authority and the trust assumed that excluded patients would not be seen or treated elsewhere. The consultant plastic surgeons reviewed the referral letters for patients who were not given an operation and returned the letters with explanatory notes.

This study aimed to assess the acceptability of the new system among patients and general practitioners and to determine the outcome of cases excluded under the new criteria.

Presented in part at the International Society of Pharmacoepidemiology annual meeting in Barcelona, Spain, 19-23 August 2000. We are grateful to the Swedish Centre for Epidemiology (National Board of Health and Welfare) and the National Corporation of Swedish Pharmacies (Apoteket AB, formerly Apoteksbolaget) for access to the Swedish Health Care Database on Pharmaceutical Agents, and to Frank Wollheim, Department of Rheumatology, Lund University Hospital for his support.

Contributors: JM had the original idea for the article, designed and performed the analysis and interpretation of the data, and drafted, wrote, and revised the content. JF programmed the database. All authors were involved in the study design, data interpretation, content revision, and approval of the final version. JM is the guarantor of the paper.

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For those technologies for which cost per QALY or per life year was cited, all received positive recommendations, and all but one (riluzole) had cost per QALY below £30 000. The imposition of restrictions on recommended use generally reduced the cost per QALY. Patients' values were cited as the reason for recommending riluzole for motor neurone disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis form only), despite its relatively high cost per QALY of £34 000-44 000. NICE cited “the severity and relatively short life span of people with ALS and in particular . . . the values which patients place on the extension of tracheotomy free survival time.”

The provisional guidance that recommended against the use of beta interferons and glatiramer for multiple sclerosis cited their relatively high cost per QALY (£40 000 to £90 000 on the most optimistic estimates) and stated that NICE had in mind the cost effectiveness ratio of technologies it had previously recommended.11

The final element of each NICE guidance concerns the costs to the NHS of implementing the guidance (cost impact). Estimates of gross and net costs are provided, the latter taking into account any substitution of old technologies by new ones. The items that led to major increases in net costs were tribavirin and interferon alfa, both prescribed for hepatitis C (£55m in total, possibly spread over several years, and due mainly to a backlog of untreated cases) and glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors for acute coronary syndromes (net £30m-31m), with none of the others costing more than £20m. The impact on total net cost was reduced by projected savings for some technologies—notably, restricted use of proton pump inhibitors (projected saving £40m-50m annually). The combined net cost of the 22 judgments was £200m-214m or around 0.5% of annual NHS spending in England and Wales. This provides some indication, on the basis of individual technologies, of the extent to which new health technologies may change net healthcare spending. Increases of this magnitude should be readily achieved within the real increases in NHS spending of around 6% per year over the three years to 2004, although some local bottlenecks may become apparent.

Discussion

While NICE has been caricatured under the heading “it’s easier to say yes than no,”12 it would be more accurate to characterise it as saying “yes, but . . .” Its recommendations have all cited evidence of clinical benefits, while only around half have cited cost per QALY. Many of its recommendations have specified conditions for use, such as subgroups of patients most likely to benefit. This in turn requires guidelines covering the full range of treatment options for the different groups of patients. This second, guideline, function of NICE may prove more important and challenging over the longer term, given the magnitude of the task and the paucity of evidence. By October 2000 NICE had published four guidelines and was working on a further 31, often for the same diseases as those for which guidance on technologies has been issued. The specification by NICE of conditions for use, which has generally enabled it to keep the cost per QALY below £30 000, could be seen as requiring rationing at a more detailed level, perhaps within some overall guidelines for use. Overall, however, NICE’s guidance recommending use of most technologies appraised will arguably lead to “faster and more uniform access” to these technologies rather than to denial access.

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5 Department of Health. Faster access to modern treatment; how NICE appraisal will work. London: NICE, 1999.