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The Psychiatrists’ Program
Medical Professional Liability Insurance
Designed for Psychiatrists

RISK MANAGEMENT ALERT: PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS

This alert is intended to increase awareness about potential patient safety risks and professional liability issues inherent in prescribing psychotropic medications and to provide recommendations for risk management strategies to reduce those risks.

The issue

Advances in psychopharmacology in recent decades have provided therapeutic options for patients and physicians which were unavailable just a short time ago. More options have led to an increase in the use of psychotropic medication in all populations. The efficacy and safety of psychotropic medications, especially in pediatric patients, is an ongoing issue in clinical practice and psychopharmocological research. These issues have received increased attention recently, due in part to strong advisories and safety warnings from the Food and Drug Administration (e.g., FDA Public Health Advisories like “Suicidality in Children and Adolescents Being Treated with Antidepressant Medications” in 2004 and “Treatment Challenges of Depression in Pregnancy” in 2006), certain research findings (e.g. olanzapine may be associated with increased risk of cerebrovascular accidents in elderly patients with dementia, and use of atypical antipsychotics linked to possible increased risk of hyperglycemia and diabetes), and numerous reports in the media (e.g., “Behavior Drugs Lead in Sales for Children”, NY Times, 5/17/04) which often emphasize the problems and not the benefits of these drugs. Specific concern about the off-label use of psychotropic medications to treat children, especially younger children, has been voiced by experts and the public (e.g., “Trends in Prescribing of Antipsychotic Medications for US Children” Ambulatory Pediatrics, March 2006, study showing that the number of children prescribed anti-psychotic drugs jumped fivefold between 1995 and 2002). Against this background, physicians’ prescribing decisions have the potential to be scrutinized more than ever. Accordingly, psychiatrists should consider utilizing the following risk management strategies to increase patient safety and minimize professional liability risk.

Risk Management Strategies

- **Stay informed about the medications you prescribe.** In addition to sources you frequently use (peer reviewed or published studies, continuing education courses, professional publications, etc.) see the resource list below.

- **Periodically, and due to new safety information, reevaluate the medications you currently prescribe and the clinical basis for prescribing.** Update treatment plans and recommendations accordingly. Changes in medications or dosages, re-assessment of patients, closer monitoring of patients and side-effects of medications may be required, among other clinical interventions. Consultation or getting a second opinion for complicated psychopharmacology issues should be considered.

- **Talk to your patients.** See “Talking to Patients and Families About Medications”.

- **Update informed consent.** New or updated information about the risks and benefits of using a particular psychotropic medication should be discussed and incorporated into the patient’s informed consent. Some patients may decide, based on updated information, to opt out of some treatments, try alternative medications or treatments, etc.

- **Document.** Document the clinical assessment and clinical judgment which is the basis for treatment recommendations and prescribing decisions. Document significant information about communications with patients and families regarding treatment plan recommendations, including medications. Document the patient’s informed consent. (See “Talking to Patients and Families About Medications”).
Online Resources about Psychotropic Medications for Physicians, Patients and Families

FDA
- FDA MedWatch Program for timely safety information on medications and to sign up to receive e-mail alerts, www.fda.gov/medwatch/index.html

NIMH
- Antidepressant Medications for Children and Adolescents: Information for Parents and Caregivers. Available at www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/antidepressant_child.cfm
- Questions and Answers about the NIMH Treatment for Adolescents with Depression Study (TADS), http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/tadsqa.cfm
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Health information) http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/adhdmenu.cfm

APA and AACAP
- Guides to help patient, families, and physicians make informed decisions about care for a child with depression, www.parentsmedguide.org
- AACAP website contains a variety of resources and information for families, educators, physicians and allied professionals. For example “Facts for Families” about various disorders, http://www.aacap.org/index.ww

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For more information please contact:
Risk Management Consultation Service (RMCS)
Phone: (800) 527-9181
8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. ET Monday through Friday
Visit the RMCS Online in the “For Participants Only” section on www.psychprogram.com