



The diagnosis and treatment of depression with coexisting substance misuse

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Summary notes

1. Terminology

Dual Diagnosis is a term used to refer to a group of people with co-existing problems of mental disorder and substance misuse – other terms used are:

- Comorbidity
- Mentally ill chemical abuser
- Chemically addicted mentally ill
- Co-occurring addictive and mental disorder

Prevalence

The prevalence of coexisting substance misuse and psychiatric disorder (dual diagnosis, comorbidity) has increased over the past decade, and the indications are that it will continue to rise. About half of patients in drug and alcohol services have a mental health problem.

- About 1 in 3 patients with mental health problems have a substance misuse problem as well
- About half of patients in drug and alcohol services have a mental health problem

Making a diagnosis

The first case study demonstrated the following problems in making a diagnosis.

- Patients may not always recognise their use as problematic and therefore may not report it **i.e. under reporting may occur wittingly or unwittingly**
- Obtaining a structured and detailed alcohol history is vital

Practitioners may not have the confidence to question patients about either substance use or mental illness if they operate in one or other specialty.

Distinguishing the effects of drugs and alcohol on the individual's mental state from mental illness can be challenging. One aspect of this is to try to determine 'which came first', though that is not always feasible.

Obtaining collateral information can often help to clarify the actual level of alcohol intake.

Treatment

The module outlined several key issues regarding treatment:

- Antidepressants may improve mood but may not affect drinking behaviour
- SSRIs are the drugs of choice in severely depressed patients who are drinking
- TCAs are not recommended because of the risk of interactions with alcohol, which may result in cardiac problems or death from overdose.

The British Association for Psychopharmacology guidelines

The British Association for Psychopharmacology guidelines for the treatment of substance misuse, addiction and comorbidity with psychiatric disorders primarily focus on their pharmacological management. They are based explicitly on the available evidence and presented as recommendations to aid clinical decision making for practitioners alongside a detailed review of the evidence. A consensus meeting, involving experts in the treatment of these disorders, reviewed key areas and considered the strength of the evidence and clinical implications.

The guidelines are available at <http://www.bap.org.uk/consensus/addiction.html>