FOCUS ON OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUG ABUSE: A REVIEW OF THE DIVERSION OF ANTIHISTAMINES, COUGH MEDICINES, AND DECONGESTANTS

S. CHIAPPINI, J.M. CORKERY, A. GUIRGUIS, F. SCHIFANO

University of Hertfordshire, Department of Clinical And Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hatfield, UK
stefaniachiappini9@gmail.com
AGENDA

- Use of psychoactive pharmaceuticals for recreational purposes – ‘pharming’
- Misuse of over-the-counter (OTC) medications
- Conclusions: a need for drug abuse monitoring and pharmacovigilance
NOT A NEW STORY:

Repeating pattern (Public Health England review, 2019)

• “What can be seen throughout many of these narratives is a story that occurs repeatedly: a new medicine arrives that offers benefits over existing medicines and is promoted as the hope for better treatment with fewer problems. Problems with the new medicine are quickly reported by some patients and doctors but are ignored or denied, or the evidence is just lacking for some years because the research is not done. Eventually enough reports and evidence accumulate that the problems are acknowledged and then the search is on for something better and safer... and the pattern repeats.”

• “It happened when benzodiazepines replaced barbiturates, and when z-drugs replaced benzodiazepines for insomnia. And it may be happening now as gabapentinoids are used to replace opioids for some forms of pain.”
MISUSE OF PHARMACEUTICALS

NON-MEDICAL USE vs MISUSE vs DIVERSION vs ABUSE

MedDRA

NIH

ACMD
Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs
MISUSE OF PHARMACEUTICALS

SOURCES OF DATA:

i) Emergency Departments visits and hospital admissions related to acute intoxication states
ii) Addiction treatment admissions
iii) Internet/treatment centres/schools' surveys
iv) National poison data
v) Voluntary reports to pharmacovigilance authorities
vi) Fatalities recorded by coroners, medical examiners, and other investigators

GLOBAL- OR EUROPEAN-RELATED NUMBERS ON THE ABUSE/MISUSE/NON-MEDICAL USE OF MEDICATIONS ARE ONLY PARTIALLY AVAILABLE

- Studies on the use of prescription and OTC drugs are scarce and often they do not distinguish prescription from OTC drugs and prescribed from non-prescribed use, e.g., as in the case of analgesic opioids
- The FDA and the EMCDDA are mainly focused on illicit drugs and, among prescription molecules, on already known abused molecules such as benzodiazepines and opioids
MISUSE OF PHARMACEUTICALS

- A growing use of psychoactive pharmaceuticals including over-the-counter (OTC) medications has emerged in the drug scene.
- Misusing prescription drugs and OTCs involves not only risks associated with drugs, but also:
  - Side-effects
  - Interactions between drugs (licensed/unlicensed) and other substances and products (food/alcohol)
  - Individual variation in responses (genetic differences and comorbidities)
MISUSE OF PHARMACEUTICALS

COMMON PATTERNS OF NON-MEDICAL MEDICINE USE:

• People with anxiety disorders and other mental health problems or pain may use medicines to self-medicate these symptoms without appropriate medical supervision or outside of accepted medical practice.

• People who have no medical reasons for using medicines use them for recreational or enhancement purposes.

• People who use opioids or central nervous system stimulants might self-medicate using benzodiazepines or Z-drugs to increase the high, postpone opioid withdrawal or reduce the adverse symptoms occurring after consuming stimulants.
MISUSE OF OTC PHARMACEUTICALS

When taken in high doses, over-the-counter medications can cause effects that mimic the “high” of illicit street drugs.

- Dextromethorphan (DXM)
- Loperamide
- Benzydamine (Tantum rosa ®)
- Codeine-based cough medicines
- Antihistamines (e.g., diphenhydramine, promethazine, chlorpheniramine, and dimenhydrinate)
- Pseudoephedrine-containing nasal decongestants

Source: NIDA
OTC remedies may be used to achieve psychoactive effects, such as positive effects and stimulating experiences and for self-medication purposes, such as enhancing studying, pain management, improving health, weight loss, relaxation, sleep assistance.

Their use for non-medical purposes may have developed due to their increased availability, their inexpensive cost, and the users' perceptions of their safety.

Procured from:
- family members
- international pharmacies
- from the internet (rather than ‘sketchy’ drug dealers)

The initial genuine use of the medication is mostly reported, however intentional experimenting suggested by other users may happen.

Psychiatric concomitant diseases associated with OTC misuse: depression, anxiety, somatic distress, and psychotic disorders.

Usual practice of mixing different OTCs and prescription drugs/other illicit drugs in order to enhance their effects.

The SMART choice (Miller, 2006):
- Stigma: no negative connotation
- Money: relatively inexpensive
- Access: OTC drugs might be found in many home medicines cabinets
- Risks: OTCs are available from medical companies
- Testing: routine drug tests do not test for OTCs
After completion of the selection, eligibility, and screening phases, some 92 articles published up to December 2020 were here taken into consideration; case reports, surveys, and retrospective case series analyses were included.

Most articles focused here on DXM (n = 54) and diphenhydramine (n = 12). When specified, dosages, route(s) of administration, toxicity symptoms (including both physical and psychiatric ones), and outcomes were reported.

OTC drugs were obtained by various means, including family and friends, multiple doctor prescriptions, illegal online pharmacies/shops, and theft/burglary from hospitals, residences, and pharmacies.
RESULTS

- Overall, two main populations of OTC misusers were identified:

  (a) patients already suffering from a health condition and/or a psychiatric disorder who became dependent on their prescription/OTC drugs due to prolonged/high-dosage use, e.g., DXM-based cough mixtures started for sinusitis, cough, nasal congestion, and then continued for years at higher dosages

  (b) individuals, including substance abusers, not in treatment for a medical disorder or illness who may have started to misuse/abuse with OTC medications for recreational purposes
DEXTROMETORPHAN

- DXM is a cough suppressant and opioid derivative with dose-dependent sedative, dissociative, and stimulant properties.
- Psychotropic effects are mostly related to its metabolism to its active metabolite dextrorphan, an NMDA antagonist. Dextrorphan is also thought to exert adrenergic effects by inhibiting peripheral and central catecholamine reuptake. Further, DXM has specific serotonergic and sigma-1 opioidergic properties.
- Toxicity from coformulatory compounds, i.e., hepatotoxic effects from acetaminophen; anticholinergic effects from diphenhydramine; depressant effects from ethanol; and sympathomimetic effects from pseudoephedrine.
- The abrupt cessation of the drug results in withdrawal symptoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE 1</th>
<th>STAGE 2</th>
<th>STAGE 3</th>
<th>STAGE 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(100 -200mg)</td>
<td>(200-400mg)</td>
<td>(300-600mg)</td>
<td>(&gt;600mg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trance-like euphoria</td>
<td>impairment of motor, cognitive, and perceptual functioning</td>
<td>mild dissociation</td>
<td>complete psychophysical dissociation and 'out of body' experiences ('robo-ing', 'robo-copping', or 'robo-tripping')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of well-being</td>
<td>mild hallucinations</td>
<td>feelings of physical distortion</td>
<td>violent behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>profound empathy</td>
<td>slurred speech</td>
<td>anxiety</td>
<td>psychotic symptoms, including paranoia, delusional beliefs, perceptual distortion, and vivid auditory and visual hallucinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social relaxation</td>
<td>lethargy</td>
<td>hallucinations</td>
<td>possible death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ataxia</td>
<td>hyperexicatability</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>memory impairment</td>
<td>poor motor control</td>
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Dose-related DXM psychic effects (therapeutic range: from 60 to 120 mg/day in divided doses)
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THE ‘SLEEPY CHICKEN’ CHALLENGE
LOPERAMIDE

- It is a peripherally acting opioid derivative used as an OTC antidiarrheal, long considered a drug with low abuse potential.
- It has been reported for its euphoric effects (‘lope highs’) and its use to alleviate opiate/opioid withdrawal (‘poors’ methadone’).
- Even though safe within normal dosages (2-16mg), at higher dosages (>50mg) CNS depression, electrocardiogram abnormalities and fatal cardiotoxicity have been described.
- Some also take advantage of cytochrome inhibitors, such as cimetidine and grapefruit juice, as well as P-GlycoProtein inhibitors, such as quinidine and pepper, to raise serum levels of the drug.
- Loperamide will not show up on a standard urine drug screen.
LOPERAMIDE

Overview of loperamide misuse-abuse-/dependence-/withdrawal-related Adverse Drug Reactions (ADRs) as reported to the EudraVigilance (EV) database

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOPERAMIDE ADRs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time-frame considered</td>
<td>09/2005–08/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of 'suspect' ADRs</td>
<td>7,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misuse-abuse-/dependence-/withdrawal-related ADRs</td>
<td>1,883 (1,883/7,895= 25.11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of unique patients reported to the database</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age-range most typically represented</td>
<td>18-64 (4,577/ 7,895= 57.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADRs most typically represented</td>
<td>drug use disorder 742 (742/1,983=37.4%), intentional overdose 502 (502/1,983=25.3%), intentional product misuse 296 (296/1,983=14.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender most typically represented</td>
<td>Female (F/M ratio:4.401/3.397=1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loperamide identified as the sole drug</td>
<td>182 cases (182/434=41.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concomitant drugs most typically represented in the remaining (434-182) 252 cases</td>
<td>Antidepressants in 44 cases (44/252= 17.5%); SSRIs most typically reported; Benzodiazepines in 40 cases (40/252=15.9%); Opioids in 23 cases (23/252=9.1%); Other psychotropic drugs in 21 cases (21/252=8.3%); Antipsychotics in 11 cases (11/252=4.36%); Mood stabilizers in 5 cases (5/252=3.57%);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resulted in death</td>
<td>305/1,983 (15.34%, corresponding to 94/434 cases: 21.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicides</td>
<td>373 ADRs, corresponding to 42/434 cases; 9.67%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Is there such a thing as a 'lope' dope? Analysis of loperamide-related European Medicines Agency (EMA) pharmacovigilance database reports.

Schifano F¹, Chiappini S¹,².
Benzydamine hydrochloride (BZY) is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) with analgesic, antipyretic, and antimicrobial properties, available since 1966 for the symptomatic treatment of acute inflammatory states of the oral and vaginal mucosae. It is dispensed distributed without prescription and marketed for external use in various formulations including mouthwash, vaginal douche preparations, and capsule forms.

- **The maximum oral daily dose of BZY is 150–200mg** and psychiatric adverse effects have not been reported at this dosage.
- Relatively little is known about the effects of BZY on the central nervous system. **Neurological symptoms such as dizziness, vertigo, hyperactivity, excitation, and convulsions have been reported because of high-dosage (500 – 3,000 mg) systemic ingestion.** Dose-dependent psychotropic effects including anxiety, agitation, paranoia, and hallucinations; (specifically visual hallucinations, with insects and monsters being reported, have been described. So-called BZY “trips” are anecdotally reportedly characterized by feelings of happiness, euphoria, and ego-dystonic hallucinatory experiences, which appear generally to resolve spontaneously in 2-3 days.
- Over the last 20 years or so, evidence has emerged regarding the widespread recreational use of BZY in various countries, including Brazil, Italy, Romania, Poland and Turkey.
BENZYDAMINE

• BZY was included in April 2010 in the list of Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) by the EMCDDA and by Europol. Consistent with this, in Turkey BZY was moved in 2012 into prescription status.

• A range of neurobiological mechanisms may be involved in the BZY-related onset of these psychiatric symptoms, including:

  i) cross-sensitivity with other substances of abuse. Indeed, preclinical studies suggested that BZY may show a powerful reinforcing effect in animals previously administered with heroin and cocaine.

  ii) BZY affinity with CB1 cannabinoid receptors.

  iii) at high dosages (e.g. 2,000-2,500mg), BZY might influence the dopaminergic regulation of limbic-striatal interplay.

  iv) BZY-related serotonergic 5HT-2A activation, which may be associated with an indole group within the BZY chemical structure, and may explain the BZY-related visual hallucinations alteration.

• BZY acute toxicity in oral dosages of 500–3,000 mg include signs and symptoms of CNS stimulation, including seizures, hyperreflexia, tachycardia, paraesthesia, excitation, hyperarousal/hyperactivity, and convulsions; moreover, frequent psychiatric symptoms after ingestion of BZY preparations include visual hallucinations, particularly in the form of zoomorphic visions, referential concerns, and paranoia. No BZY-related deaths have been here reported in the literature.
CODEINE

- **Calming effects**: being an opioid, it determines rewarding and pleasant effects; relief from tension and anxiety; and decreased aggression

- Combined with promethazine is popular as ‘purple drank’ or ‘purple lean’, ‘sizzurp’, ‘dirty sprite’, as mixed with soft drinks and candy syrups

- **Side effects**: dizziness, blurred vision, nausea, memory problems

- **Coma and death** have been reported, especially when codeine is combined with other sedative drugs or depressant substances, such as alcohol

- Chronic use of codeine and ‘purple drank’ can lead to the development of **drug tolerance or dependence**

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"Purple Drank" (Codeine and Promethazine Cough Syrup): A Systematic Review of a Social Phenomenon with Medical Implications

A Muzzii, G Stigliano, A Lalli, M Coladonato, L D’Angelo, F Esposito, C Cappello, M Petroni, G Martinotti, F Schifano, M Di Giannantonio

Beyond the ‘purple drank’: Study of promethazine abuse according to the European Medicines Agency adverse drug reaction reports

Stefania Chiappini, Fabrizio Schifano, John Martin Corkery, Amira Guerguis
PROMETHAZINE

- Promethazine is a histamine (H1) receptor antagonist that is commonly used for symptomatic relief of nausea and vomiting, for allergic conditions, motion sickness and common cold, and for short-term use treatment of insomnia in adults or as a paediatric sedative

- It is classified as a first-generation antihistamine molecule which, compared with second-generation antihistamines, easily penetrates the blood-brain barrier and is associated with adverse effects such as moderate/intense sedation

- During the past 15 years the abuse of promethazine, especially from OTC and prescription cough and cold medicines and at higher-than-recommended dosages, has been reported

- Toxicity might result in severe impairment of cognitive and psychomotor functions due to central nervous system (CNS) depression/reduced levels of consciousness, and may cause fatalities
PROMETHAZINE

Analysis of promethazine abuse/misuse/dependence/wit hdrawal cases recorded by the EudraVigilance (EV), 2003-2019
OTHER ANTIHISTAMINES

Diphenhydramine/DPH antihistamine moiety of dimenhydrinate/DH

Diphenhydramine recommended dose is

50mg, no more than 3x daily

300mg = mild euphoria and hallucinations

Over 1,000mg daily = extreme instance of abuse
### PSEUDOEPHEDRINE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sympathomimetic properties, exerting a stimulating action on (\alpha, \beta_1,) and (\beta_2)-adrenergic receptors</th>
<th><strong>ACUTE EFFECTS</strong></th>
<th><strong>CHRONIC EFFECTS</strong></th>
<th>Due to the possibility to be used to manufacture the class A controlled drug (\text{methamphetamine,}) restrictions have been in place in the UK to manage the risk of products containing pseudoephedrine and ephedrine; in the US, a prescription is not needed in most States, and in remaining States there are limits on how much an adult subject can buy each month</th>
<th>Brand names and street names: “Chalk”, “Crank”, “Meth”, “Speed”; ‘Russian Cocktail’ includes pseudoephedrine consumed together with potassium permanganate and acetylsalicylic acid diluted in water; common brand names: Sudafed®, Nexafed®, Zephrex-D®; Claritin® includes pseudoephedrine and loratadine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• stimulant effects, e.g. euphoria, insomnia, diminished sense of fatigue, anorexia, and accelerated thinking;</td>
<td>• dependence might be developed after long-term use</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• psychotic symptoms with auditory and visual hallucinations, persecutory delusions, fear, disorganized behaviour might develop after high-dose consumption</td>
<td>• withdrawal symptoms: dysphoria, restlessness, abnormal perceptions</td>
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</table>
CONCLUSIONS

- OTC misusing issues are both widespread worldwide and popular
- **Vulnerable categories** included adolescents and young adults, although real prevalence figures remained unknown, due to a lack of appropriate monitoring systems
- OTC recreational intake appeared to be associated with high/very high dosages; idiosyncratic routes of administration (e.g., snorting, IM, IV); and associated with ingestion of both licit (e.g., alcohol, prescription opioids, benzodiazepines, other OTCs); and illicit (e.g., cannabis, cocaine, ketamine, etc.) drugs
CONCLUSIONS

- Non-existence of information on abuse/misuse potential of a new medicines interacting with the CNS does not mean that a specific medicine does not actually produce these effects.
- Healthcare professionals who work in emergency departments, general practice, and mental health services should be aware of new drug abuse trends, and consider the eventual diversion of medicines and the risk of polysubstance abuse.
- Education of both clinicians and users.
- Pharmacovigilance.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My Supervisors: Fabrizio Schifano; John M. Corkery; and Amira Guirguis
Thank you for the attention!