

LETTERS

ANTIPSYCHOTICS IN NURSING HOMES

Improve environment to reduce pressure to prescribe antipsychotic drugs in nursing homes

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McCleery and Fox say that the ethical concern about prescribing antipsychotic drugs to residents of nursing homes who have dementia is worthy of an editorial in itself.¹ Rarely do such patients ask to be treated: requests usually come from care staff. However, such requests do not result simply from a desire for a quiet life for staff. Nurses in such establishments often work with minimal staffing and comparatively little training and specialist support. They may claim and intend to practise person centred care, but the difficulty they deal with is having both to care for an individual resident and to allocate resources to all the other residents. The worst result is that individuals' wishes and their wellbeing may be over-ridden or perhaps not even considered.

The implication when writing about neuropsychiatric symptoms in dementia is that all odd behaviour is caused by the dementia. But the social and physical environment in which the person with the damaged brain lives must be considered. Macbeth remarked: "And that which should accompany old age,/As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,/I must not look to

have . . ." ² Well, there is not much of that in most of the nursing homes I have visited, and social isolation, an unfamiliar environment, inactivity, and boredom are as likely to be relevant to the emergence of difficult behaviour as the underlying dementia.

A broader conceptualisation of what affects behaviour by everyone might reduce the pressure on reluctant doctors to prescribe antipsychotic drugs and increase pressure on care home providers and their funders to pay more attention to the quality of the environments and the levels of care they provide.

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 McCleery J, Fox R. Antipsychotic prescribing in nursing homes. *BMJ* 2012;344:e1093. (23 February.)
- 2 Shakespeare W. Macbeth. Act V, scene III. http://nfs.sparknotes.com/macbeth/page_192.html.

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