

County-wide survey of the repeat prescription of hypnotics

Sir: Taylor *et al* (1998) identify the extent of benzodiazepine use in an elderly community and report that the prevalence of hypnotics in women is twice that in men, and that the prevalence and incidence of hypnotics are strongly associated with increasing age. We wish to share the results of our county-wide survey into the repeat prescribing of hypnotics (lorazepam, lorazepam, nitrazepam, temazepam, zolpidem and zopiclone) which took place towards the end of 1997. All Cornish practices were invited to participate in the survey which involved identifying the number, age and gender of patients over the age of 15 years who had a current

repeat prescription record for any of the hypnotics listed above. Thirty-four out of 77 practices took part, giving a total practice population of 172 278 (aged 15 years and over).

We found that 2.62% of the population surveyed were on a repeat prescription for a hypnotic, with females more likely than males to be receiving hypnotic medication (3.45 *v.* 1.7%). Like Taylor *et al*, our survey revealed that hypnotic prevalence is clearly associated with older age. For both genders combined there was a repeat prescription rate of 4.61% in the 65–74-year-old group, 9.14% in those aged 75–84, and 16.42% for those aged 85 plus.

Each practice was also asked to review the notes of 50 of these patients. In doing

so it was ascertained that, of the 1611 patients reviewed, 12% had previously failed in an attempt to have their hypnotic withdrawn, while 48% were considered as unsuitable candidates for withdrawal (deemed to be terminally ill, suffering from organic brain disease, had a history of psychosis or likely to resort to alcohol or other inappropriate drugs).

Taylor, S., McCracken, C. F. M., Wilson, K. C. M., *et al* (1998) Extent and appropriateness of benzodiazepine use. Results from an elderly urban community. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **173**, 433–438.

M. Wilcock, I. Mackenzie, J. Bolt Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority, John Keay House, St Austell, Cornwall PL25 4NQ

One hundred years ago

States of over-excitability, hyper-sensitiveness, and mental explosiveness in children

In the *Scottish Medical and Surgical Journal* for June Dr. Clouston of Edinburgh describes certain morbid conditions in neurotic children. The vagueness and variety of conditions have prevented them from being systematically described; these conditions are often found to lie on the borderland of mental disease. There is little or no pyrexia in any of them and conditions such as delirium, night terrors, convulsions, and loss of consciousness are excluded from this category. They are attendant on developmental conditions of brain and mind occurring in childhood and are evoked in full form only when a neurotic heredity is present. The first of these morbid states is

hyper-excitability – an undue re-activeness to mental and emotional stimuli which in ordinary children would evoke only slight response. The excessive movements of the child may be partly choreic in character and they may, on the whole, last for months before passing away. A second type is marked by an undue activity and instability of the special senses of sight and hearing. Such children readily develop visual and auditory hallucinations, often nocturnal and of terrifying character. A third type is marked by excessive or morbid development of imagination. These children are full of vivid fancies and prone to delusions and false beliefs concerning things which everyday experience fails to correct. The power to invent lies and extraordinary stories is strong in these subjects and the most bi-

zarre and fantastic creations may be conjured up by them and for the time being be believed in as firmly as realities. This condition of the brain may last for months or years. In other types, again, morbid suspiciousness and distrust with unsociability may be developed, while finally a few may exhibit epileptic symptoms with a tendency to pass into automatic states. A milk diet in abundance with bromides has been found to give the best general results in the treatment of these cases.

REFERENCE

Lancet, 29 July 1899, 292.

Research by Henry Rollin, Emeritus Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey