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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xh6w409>

Journal

Schizophrenia research, 143(2-3)

ISSN

0920-9964

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Publication Date

2013-02-01

DOI

10.1016/j.schres.2012.08.031

Peer reviewed

Published in final edited form as:

Schizophr Res. 2013 February ; 143(0): . doi:10.1016/j.schres.2012.08.031.

Roles in and barriers to metabolic screening for people taking antipsychotic medications: A survey of psychiatrists

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Keywords

Antipsychotic agents; schizophrenia; metabolic screening; psychiatry

Dear Editors

Premature mortality for people with serious mental illness (SMI) is impacted by under-treatment of cardiovascular risk factors and metabolic effects of antipsychotic medications (Daumit et al., 2008; Nasrallah et al., 2006). National guidelines recommend screening and monitoring for metabolic risk factors in patients receiving antipsychotic medications (Association et al., 2004; Parks et al., 2008). However, prior studies demonstrate rates of screening between 10–43% (Buckley et al., 2005; Morrato et al., 2010; Newcomer et al., 2004).

Our study fielded a survey (available upon request) aimed to understand psychiatrists' beliefs about their roles in, and the barriers to, the screening, monitoring and treatment of metabolic risk factors in patients receiving antipsychotic medications, and the characteristics of psychiatrists or their practices influencing differing attitudes. Items characterizing psychiatrists and their practices were adapted from prior national surveys (Arbuckle et al., 2008; Kreyenbuhl et al., 2007; Olfson et al., 2006). Questions were developed based on previously hypothesized roles and barriers (Buckley et al., 2005; Morrato et al., 2010; Newcomer et al., 2004) and discussions with expert researchers. Five-point Likert scales were used to assess agreement with statements about psychiatrists' roles in the screening and

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treatment of metabolic risk factors, and whether 26 barriers were significant in their practices.

Between February 2009 and March 2010, a convenience sample of psychiatrists in two urban cities identified based on their affiliation with academic medical centers or local community mental health programs was contacted to anonymously complete a paper or online survey, without incentives. Inclusion criteria for the study were psychiatrists with outpatient practices. The study was approved by institutional review boards at both study locations and was in accordance with The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki).

Likert scale responses were dichotomized into two groups, those responding “agree” or “strongly agree,” and those responding otherwise. Ordinal logistic regressions were performed on responses to the first three key perceived roles (see Table 1) with the independent variables being provider and patient characteristics.

The response rate was 65% (91/139), and 92% (84/91) met inclusion criteria. The mean age for participants meeting inclusion criteria was 44.4 years old (SD=12.1), with 58% (48/83) of participants being male. The racial/ethnic distribution was 53% (42/80) Caucasian, 28% (22/80) Asian, 9% (7/80) African-American, 6% (5/80) Latino, and 5% (4/80) other.

Ratings for statements about the roles of psychiatrists in screening for and treating metabolic risks are shown in Table 1. Barriers to screening and monitoring which more than two-thirds of participants agreed were significant were severity of psychiatric illness [84% (69/82)], insufficient physician time [87% (71/82)], difficulty arranging referral for medical follow-up [83% (68/82)], insufficient staff or staff time [80% (66/82)], wait times for medical follow-up [82% (67/82)], and difficulty collaborating with physicians providing medical follow-up [67% (55/82)]. Policymakers should consider these barriers as they develop interventions for improving general medical health in this vulnerable population.

Ordinal logistic regression showed that psychiatrists graduating from residency before the 2004 ADA/APA guidelines (OR 4.27, 95% CI=1.62–11.2, $p=0.003$) and psychiatrists with fewer than half of their patients with diagnoses of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (OR 3.75, 95% CI=1.52–9.25, $p=0.004$) were more likely to agree that monitoring is the role of psychiatrists *only if* patients did not have primary care providers. This may indicate an evolution over time in perceptions about screening and a need for targeted educational interventions for psychiatrists who have already completed training or with less contact with SMI populations. Psychiatrist or psychiatrists’ practice characteristics were not associated with other perceived monitoring roles.

This study supports prior findings that psychiatrists recognize the importance of screening for metabolic risk in patients receiving antipsychotic medications (Newcomer et al., 2004). Additionally, we found that psychiatrists believe their role includes conducting metabolic screening and providing certain interventions *even if* their patients have primary care physicians, but *not* prescribing oral medications for metabolic abnormalities. This gap between screening and treatment is concerning given that one of the top identified barriers was difficulty arranging medical follow-up, and may represent a target for interventions to provide psychiatrists with tools to initiate treatment of metabolic abnormalities.

This study has several limitations. This study used a convenience sample of psychiatrists in metropolitan centers. Differences between responders and non-responders are not known. The sample is not sufficiently large or diverse to assess the role of various work settings, institutional access to primary care, and other contextual factors on psychiatrist role perceptions regarding metabolic screening and monitoring.

This study provides a framework for future assessments of psychiatrists' perceived roles in and barriers to metabolic screening for people with SMI. Further surveys of other stakeholder groups (e.g., primary care providers, consumers) may help to elucidate the reasons for poor metabolic screening rates among persons with SMI and thereby help identify targets for intervention.

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Table 1

Psychiatrists' perceived roles in performing specific screening and monitoring tasks and in treatment for metabolic dysfunction.

Survey Prompt	Respondents Agreeing ^a			
	% ^b	n ^c	N ^d	95% CI ^e
<i>Monitoring metabolic risk factors in patients on antipsychotic medications at risk of causing metabolic dysfunction is the role of:</i>				
Primary care providers, not psychiatrists or mental health clinics.	33%	27	81	23–44%
The psychiatrist or mental health clinic, <i>only if</i> patients do not have an established primary care provider.	53%	42	80	42–63%
The psychiatrist or mental health clinic, <i>even if</i> patients have established primary care.	81%	67	83	72–89%
<i>If psychiatrists or mental health clinic staff are responsible for monitoring metabolic risk factors, should they be responsible for checking:</i>				
BMI	82%	67	82	73–90%
Waist circumference	52%	43	82	42–63%
Blood pressure	77%	63	82	68–86%
Fasting labs	90%	74	82	84–97%
<i>If patients are found to have metabolic abnormalities likely associated with treatment with antipsychotic medications, it may be the responsibility of psychiatrists to:</i>				
provide patients with education regarding metabolic syndrome and related metabolic risk indicators	80%	66	83	71–88%
refer to primary care providers or other medical follow-up	95%	79	83	91–100%
directly contact patients' primary care or other medical providers	89%	74	83	82–96%
maintain contact with primary care or other medical providers regarding continuing treatment of metabolic risk factors	92%	76	83	86–98%
refer patients to weight loss programs, or other related psychosocial or support group programs	75%	62	83	65–84%
<i>Prescribing oral medications to treat any aspect of metabolic dysfunction (e.g., statins, metformin) may, in certain circumstances, be the responsibility of psychiatrists.</i>	34%	28	82	24–44%

^a Respondents Agreeing represents participants responding "agree" or "strongly agree" to each respective survey question;

^b % denotes percent;

^c n denotes number agreeing;

^d N denotes total number of participants;

^e CI denotes confidence interval.