

LETTERS



LONG TERM USE OF PSYCHIATRIC DRUGS

Recommendations in debate on psychiatric drugs are insufficiently justified

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We are a group of Cochrane editors who are responsible for Cochrane reviews relating to mental health. Like our colleague, Peter Gøtzsche, we are writing in a personal capacity.¹

We recognise that Peter has an important record as a renowned methodologist and researcher. However, we believe that in the head to head debate on whether psychiatric drugs cause more harm than good he and his colleagues step beyond the accepted role of independent researchers by appearing to recommend a course of action that could lead to patient harm.¹

We agree that the benefits of psychotropic drugs have been systematically exaggerated and that harms (including suicide) have been underestimated. Such overly optimistic interpretations can lead to patient harm.

However, the central argument—that almost all psychiatric drugs could be stopped without causing harm—is potentially damaging and is not justified within the article. In many cases the citations provided lead to Peter's unpublished book or those of others, rather than scientific study reports, making it hard or impossible for the reader to check their veracity.

The data on suicide related to antidepressant use are central to Peter's argument. However, it is unclear whether the figures presented relate to total suicides in the studies, total suicides in those taking antidepressants, or additional suicides in people taking antidepressants compared with those not taking them. This is crucial to understanding how many of the suicides can be attributed directly to the antidepressants. The same is true for the estimates of total deaths: the data presented are simply insufficient to justify the confident conclusions and precise estimates reported.

In summary, we are worried that the picture painted may be incomplete and that Peter's radical recommendations are insufficiently justified.

Full response at: www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h2435/rr.

1 Gøtzsche PC, Young AH, Crace J. Does long term use of psychiatric drugs cause more harm than good? *BMJ* 2015;350:h2435. (12 May.)

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