A cross-sectional prevalence survey of psychotropic medication prescribing patterns in prisons in England

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Declared competing interests of authors: none

Published September 2014
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr02330

Plain English summary

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Health Services and Delivery Research 2014; Vol. 2: No. 33
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr02330

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In prisons, mental illnesses such as depression and schizophrenia are more common than in the general population. Therefore, the level of need for mental health treatment is high, which may include prescribed medicines such as antidepressants. Currently, there are no data on the frequency or types of medicines prescribed to prisoners for mental health problems. However, researchers and patients have questioned the reasons for, and suitability and safety of, prescribing mental health drugs in prison.

In a national survey of 11 prisons, prescription and clinical data were extracted from patient health-care records. Overall, 17% of men and 48% of women in prison were prescribed at least one mental health medicine. Prescribing rates in prison were four times higher among men and six times higher among women than among patients in the community. Prisoners were more likely than community patients to receive certain medicines associated with sedation and weight gain. One-third of mental health medicines were prescribed for conditions not approved by current guidelines.

Patients attending general practitioner appointments in prison rated the acceptability of prescribing decisions. One in four patients identified a mental health issue as their main problem. These individuals were more likely to receive a new prescription, but less likely to be satisfied overall with consultation outcomes than those presenting with other health problems.

The evidence from this study shows very high rates of mental health medication prescribing in prisons, particularly among women. Further work is necessary to determine the optimum balance between medication and alternative treatments for mentally ill prisoners.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its proceeding programmes as project number 10/2002/03. The contractual start date was in March 2012. The final report began editorial review in December 2013 and was accepted for publication in May 2014. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health.

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