Cognitive–behavioural therapy for clozapine-resistant schizophrenia: the FOCUS RCT

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Declared competing interests of authors: Anthony P Morrison reports personal fees from the provision of training workshops in cognitive–behavioural therapy (CBT) for psychosis and royalties from books on the topic, outside the submitted work. Andrew Gumley reports grants from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme (grant number 13/15/04) outside the submitted work. Douglas Turkington reports personal fees from Insight–CBT partnership (Insight Healthcare, Newcastle upon Tyne), outside the submitted work. Gemma Shields reports grants from NIHR during the conduct of the study. Graeme MacLennan reports grants from the NIHR HTA programme during the conduct of the study. Hamish J MacLeod reports that he occasionally provides CBT for psychosis workshops and receives fees for this work. John Norrie reports personal fees from the NIHR Editors Board and grants from NIHR HTA General Board Deputy Chairperson, outside the submitted work, and has membership of the HTA Funding Boards Policy Group and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis Impact Review Panel. Linda Davies reports grants from the NIHR HTA programme during the conduct of the study. Paul French has membership of the HTA prioritisation Panel. Paul Hutton reports that he sits on an Expert Steering Group for Professor Jill Stavert’s Centre for Mental Health and Incapacity Law Rights and Policy at Edinburgh Napier University, and that he is a member of a committee developing National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines on supporting decision-making for people who may lack mental capacity. Robert Dudley reports receiving a NIHR Comprehensive Local Research Network Greenshoots award to fund time to support his contribution to the FOCUS (Focusing on Clozapine Unresponsive Symptoms) trial, royalties from Guilford Press and personal fees from Trinity College Dublin, outside the submitted work. Samantha Bowe reports personal fees from Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust and personal fees from Cheshire & Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, outside the submitted work. Thomas RE Barnes reports personal fees from Sunovion (Marlborough, MA, USA) and Otsuka (Tokyo, Japan)/Lundbeck (Copenhagen, Denmark), outside the submitted work.

Published February 2019
DOI: 10.3310/hta23070

Plain English summary

The FOCUS RCT
Health Technology Assessment 2019; Vol. 23: No. 7
DOI: 10.3310/hta23070

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Plain English summary

People who experience schizophrenia are usually prescribed antipsychotic medication. Some who take an antipsychotic continue to experience distressing and persistent symptoms; for these people the antipsychotic clozapine has been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms. About 30–40% of people who try clozapine experience persistent symptoms and there is little research to indicate what treatments are effective if clozapine has a poor impact. The Focusing on Clozapine Unresponsive Symptoms (FOCUS) trial was designed to test whether or not a talking treatment called cognitive–behavioural therapy (CBT) is clinically effective in reducing the symptoms of schizophrenia, and whether or not CBT is cost-effective.

A total of 487 participants who met the criteria for a schizophrenia diagnosis and who had tried clozapine but experienced a poor response were recruited. Participants were randomly allocated to receive CBT plus treatment as usual (TAU) or TAU alone. CBT lasted for 9 months, and participants could have up to 30 hours of CBT. Participants were followed up at 9 and 21 months and it was found that those who had CBT experienced some small improvements in symptoms of schizophrenia at 9 months, but this did not last to 21 months. The data suggest that CBT was not cost-effective compared with TAU. Some benefits of CBT were evident at 21 months, such as feeling less emotional distress, a better understanding of ‘delusional’ beliefs and better self-rated recovery. The small benefit of CBT at 9 months is the same level of benefit people get from taking a second antipsychotic medication, but without the medication side effects. Although CBT cannot be recommended routinely for all people who have a poor response to clozapine, it may be helpful for some.

The results cannot answer questions about how helpful CBT is for people who have received a diagnosis of schizophrenia who have not tried clozapine. Better ways to help this population needed to be developed.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 10/101/02. The contractual start date was in December 2012. The final report began editorial review in August 2017 and was accepted for publication in February 2018. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft 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 HTA programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. 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 HTA programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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