

Use of psychotropic medications in residential aged care

Industry summary of a Flinders University study

The problem

Psychotropic medications (including antipsychotics, antidepressants and benzodiazepines) are commonly prescribed to older people in residential aged care settings, particularly to manage behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia. There is limited evidence of efficacy and potential serious side effects for some of these medications.

New Australian clinical practice guidelines for people with dementia recommend avoidance of anti-psychotic medications for management of changed behaviours and the use of non-pharmacological approaches instead where possible.

Person-centred care for people with dementia residing in residential aged care facilities may have positive effects on changed behaviours. Small-group, home-like facilities have been designed to provide person-centred care for residents in an environment that feels more like their own home and encourages independence.

Study snapshot

Aims:

- To examine if the use of psychotropic medications was reduced in small, home-like facilities
- Investigate association between psychotropic medication use and resident quality of life.

Method:

- Cross-sectional national study
- Quality of life was measured with a dementia-specific measure of health-related quality of life questionnaire (DEMQOL) and a generic health-related quality of life questionnaire (EQ-5D-5L), completed by the resident or a family member proxy.

Results:

- 22% of study participants resided in small group, home like facilities
- People living in a home-like model of care had lower psychotropic medication use, including benzodiazepines and antidepressants
- An increasing number of psychotropics used was associated with lower quality of life on both the DEMQOL and the EQ-5D-5L



Suggested improvements for residential aged care

- The prescription of psychotropic medications to older residents in residential aged care facilities could be reviewed by consulting general practitioners to see if alternative non-pharmacological approaches could be used, carefully considering the balance of benefits and harms of possible discontinuation
- Adoption of a home-like model of residential care may help to reduce the need for psychotropic medications
- Existing evidence indicates that these facilities may be beneficial for the residents and the small-group, home-like model should be considered when designing facilities in the future
- Adaptation of existing facilities to incorporate characteristics of home-like facilities could also be considered
- Further research into these models of care is needed to fully understand the effects on residents and staff.

Conclusion

Small-group, home-like models of residential care are associated with lower use of potentially harmful psychotropic medications by the residents. This may lead to improvements in quality of life.

