

Psychological Medicine

MONOGRAPH SUPPLEMENT 16

The cardiovascular effects
of antidepressants
by S. J. Warrington,
C. Padgham and M. Lader

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The cardiovascular effects of antidepressants

Depression is one of the commonest psychiatric disorders and antidepressant drugs of various types are useful in its treatment. However, many of these drugs have a wide range of side effects which may limit both the choice of medication and the dosage eventually attained. Cardiovascular side effects present particular problems because they are common and may present some hazard, especially in the elderly and those with pre-existing cardiovascular pathology. As depression is commonest in the elderly, difficult therapeutic situations frequently occur.

The prototypal antidepressants had a marked propensity to induce cardiovascular side effects. In the past decade or so, several newer compounds of different chemical and pharmacological types have been introduced. Almost all have been developed with fewer and less severe cardiovascular effects as a main aim. In particular, safety in overdosage has been sought.

This monograph reviews the cardiovascular effects of the various types of antidepressants in clinical use. The frequency, severity and clinical importance of these effects are placed in perspective. The first section deals with effects on blood pressure: postural hypotension is common and may be dose-limiting and hypertensive crises may occur with the MAOIs. Cardiac contractility is discussed in the second section but is not generally impaired by antidepressants. The third section covers the complex and important issue of cardiac conduction and arrhythmias. Marked differences between the various types of antidepressant are noted. Reports of an association between the therapeutic use of tricyclic antidepressants and sudden death are unconvincing. The last area is that of overdose and, again, antidepressants differ substantially in their toxicity.

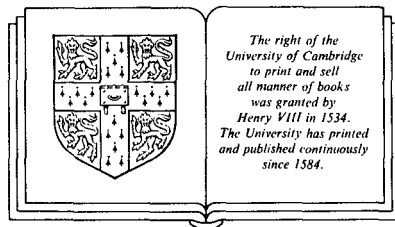
Finally, the use of various antidepressants in patients with hypertension, cardiac failure, angina pectoris, myocardial infarction, and cardiac arrhythmias is discussed and guidelines suggested for the selection and use of antidepressant medication.

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