Book reviews

The Maudsley 2003 Prescribing Guidelines, 7th edition

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Psychiatric therapeutics originated with the advent of the barbiturates at the beginning of the twentieth century. With their broad spectrum of action these drugs dominated psychiatric and neurological therapeutics for over 50 years. The modern era of psychiatric therapeutics started in the 1950s with the serendipitous discovery of the first antidepressants (imipramine, iproniazide) and antipsychotics (chlorpromazine). For the next 30 years drugs available for prescribing by psychiatrists included mainly descendents of these early prototypes (tricyclic antidepressants, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, 'classical' antipsychotics), together with the later discovered benzodiazepines for the treatment of anxiety disorders. The differences between individual drugs in each class were relatively minor, and the clinician's choice was mainly guided by personal preference often based upon clinical habit. The situation has become more complex with the advent of some new classes of both antidepressants (selective inhibitors of either 5-hydroxytryptamine or noradrenaline re-uptake) and antipsychotics ('atypical' antipsychotics). Although the new drugs have some considerable clinical advantages, they also create a significant financial burden for the Health Service. Not surprisingly, the prescribing clinician has become quite bewildered when making choices between 'old and cheap' and 'new and dear' drugs. The prescriber's lot has been further complicated by the demise of the benzodiazepines as the treatment of choice for anxiety-related symptoms. Therefore, a real need has arisen to provide the prescriber with some guidelines. The Maudsley Guidelines have come about as a response to this need. They were initiated by the Drug and Therapeutics Committee of the Bethlem and

Maudsley NHS Trust in the mid-1990s, and they were meant originally for internal use for prescribers within the Trust. The first formally published edition was the fifth edition in 1999.

The present edition demonstrates that the Maudsley guidelines have come of age. This is a well constructed, thoughtful, up-to-date book, containing pertinent references to the literature. Following a short chapter on plasma concentration monitoring of psychotropics and anticonvulsants, the book covers the major clinical areas of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness), depression/anxiety, and neuropsychiatric conditions (substance abuse, epilepsy). Separate sections are devoted to 'special' patient groups (e.g. children, the elderly, pregnant women, patients with renal or hepatic impairment, patients with dementia, violent patients). The guidance for drug choice is based, wherever possible, upon published literature, including mainly meta-analyses and reports of individual trials, Cochrane reviews, and also pertinent conference abstracts collected in 2002/2003. When available, reference is made to the guidelines of the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE).

This is an excellent book: the layout is pleasing and clear, it is easy to find almost any clinically important information on psychiatric drugs, and the information/guidance provided is usually based upon up-to-date evidence. I can recommend that every psychiatric prescriber has this book at his/her fingertips. However, the book should be used as intended and that is for guidance and not as a collection of prescriptive rules. It remains incumbent upon the prescribing clinician to use his/her judgement in the case of each individual patient.

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