Visits for Depression by Elderly Patients

To the Editor:—The media attention this year announcing the “Baby Boomer” turning 60 underscores the findings of the article by Harman, Veazie, and Lyness, published in the September 2006 issue of JGIM.¹ Knowing millions of Americans suffer from depression every year, and that in five short years the population of baby boomers will be age 65, I feel the need to provide successful interventions for this age group.

Harman et al. revealed that 64% of all depression visits made by this population (65 and over) were to primary care providers, nearly evenly split between family/general practice and Internal Medicine.¹ They also found very low referral rates for psychotherapy, which they feel is at least as effective as antidepressant medications. Living and working in a rural community in the Midwest, where “older Americans” continue home remedies and rituals, I would be surprised to see a survey (in this area) in which a case of depression was treated anywhere but a primary care setting. Considering the era these older Americans grew up in and the stigma attached to a mental illness, it does not seem an oddity that their symptoms would be detected and treated by their primary care provider rather than by a mental health provider.

I agree that depression among elders is under-diagnosed and under-treated and, many times, is likely due to the presenting criteria of the patient. As a healthcare provider in a rural poverty-stricken area, I must keep the facts of this article

in mind along with those from an article by Singh, Clements, and Singh in which they reported the feasibility and efficacy of physical exercise as a treatment for clinical depression in the elderly population.² Psychotherapy is not readily available for many rural inhabitants. Keeping in mind that the standard treatment with antidepressants and psychotherapy has been proven efficacious in the elderly, I may have to seek alternative therapy with those patients who cannot or will not accept the gold standard treatment for depression.

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