Depression in carers of elderly people living at home

Alcohol misuse could be a factor

EDITOR,—In their study of the prevalence of depression in carers of elderly people living at home, Gill Livingston and colleagues used diagnoses according to ICD-10.¹ However, there was no mention of the ICD-10 category F10-F19, disorders due to psychoactive substance use. I suppose this was due to it not being sought rather than it not existing, as excessive drinking is widespread—28% of men and 11% of women in the general population drink more than the recommended "safe" levels.² My clinical experience suggests that this population of carers may be at increased risk.

About 15% of men and 5% of women over the age of 65 drink more than the recommended weekly safe drinking levels. In community based studies of elderly people, harmful drinking has been found in 3-27% of men and 0-9% of women.³ The misuse of alcohol may present non-specifically, with self neglect, confusion, malnutrition, or it may cause exacerbation of pre-existing conditions such as dementia.⁴

Increased psychiatric morbidity in the spouses of problem drinkers is well documented, and this may apply in caring for elderly people with alcohol related problems. The Centre for Research on Drugs and Health Behaviour is currently conducting a study on home carers and the identification of substance misuse and mental health problems in elderly people. Previous studies indicate that a proportion of elderly clients of home carers consume significant amounts of alcohol and also that carers are asked by their clients to buy alcohol.⁵ Alcohol and drug

problems in elderly people are easily overlooked. Unless there is a high level of awareness to look for substance misuse, opportunities for therapeutic gains will be missed. Livingston and colleagues' results suggest that caring for people with mental illness predisposes carers to depression; I should like to know whether this population also has an increased risk of substance misuse.

R H BIRD

Senior registrar in substance misuse

Community Alcohol Team,
Leicestershire Community Drug and Alcohol Services,
Narborough,
Leicester LE9 5DF

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Other studies were misrepresented

EDITOR,—Gill Livingston and colleagues reach the conclusion that being the coresident carer of an elderly person with a psychiatric disorder predisposes towards suffering from depression.¹ Their conclusion may be valid, but their consideration of the issue is rather lacking in care and in depth.

Their review of similar studies refers to one paper I coauthored² and describes the findings of another as: "no significant relation was found between being a carer and cognitive impairment in the spouse. Psychological distress was, surprisingly, slightly greater in those married to the subjects with cognitive impairment."³ The first statement is meaningless. For the record, we found a weak (but statistically significant) correlation between cognitive impairment in a wife and depression in her husband. Presumably, the second statement quoted above should read "not surprisingly" Our other study² found that coresident carers of elderly people with dementia had higher stress levels but did not have higher levels of psychiatric morbidity than coresident carers of the elderly people without dementia.

The authors overlook another of our papers⁴ when they maintain that other studies have not addressed the issue of coresident carers and functional psychiatric disorder in elderly people. We found statistically significant concordance between spouses for depression and anxiety among 274 elderly married couples. As discussed in that paper, it is simplistic to view this finding as straightforward cause and effect. It ignores findings on assortative mating, whereby neurotic or psychiatrically ill members of the opposite sex are more likely to marry one another. Furthermore, Livingston and colleagues studied a sizeable proportion of coresident children, to whom psychological disorder could have been transmitted genetically rather than through the stresses of caregiving.

Finally, the authors do acknowledge that their subjects derive from a deprived urban population. Our studies were based in a small town and the surrounding rural and semirural areas.^{2,3} It seems quite possible that community cohesiveness and the availability of other relatives and

friends to share the burden of caring may contribute to some of the differences between the findings of Livingston and colleagues' study and our own.

J M EAGLES
Consultant psychiatrist

Royal Cornhill Hospital,
Aberdeen AB9 2ZH

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Carers' characteristics could be risk factors

EDITOR,—Gill Livingston and colleagues suggest that caring for people with psychiatric illness predisposes to depression, and that this may be mediated by lack of a confiding relationship.¹ Our study of carers of people with dementia suggests that pre-existing characteristics of carers determine their likelihood of becoming depressed.

We evaluated the association of carer's depression, measured by Beck's depression inventory,¹ with perceived health (number of physical symptoms and quality of sleep¹) and with sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of patients and carers (n=125). Patients' mean score on Folstein's mini-mental state examination was 14.2 (SD 6.7). Carers' mean age was 53.9 (13.9) years; 90 were women. Depression was absent (Beck's depression inventory scores <10) in 39 (31%) carers, mild (scores from 10 to 18) in 50

Table 1—Relation of patients' behavioural disturbance to carers' depression, stratified by number of physical symptoms and quality of sleep of carer

Characteristics of carers	No of carers	Mean (SD) behavioural disturbance of patient*
Carer not depressed (n=39)†		
Physical symptoms:		
≤3	24	67.6 (20.2)
>4	12	89.8 (23.7)
Quality of sleep:		
Good	29	66.5 (20.6)
Poor	10	94.2 (20.5)
Carer depressed (n=86)‡		
Physical symptoms:		
≤3	37	83.3 (23.6)
>4	49	89.5 (21.4)
Quality of sleep:		
Good	28	85.0 (27.1)
Poor	58	88.2 (20.4)

*Determined by the behaviour and mood disturbance scale; scores range from 0 to 160, higher scores indicating greater behavioural disturbance.

†Beck depression inventory score below 10 (out of 63).

‡Beck depression inventory score 10 or higher.

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(40%), moderate (19 to 29) in 28 (22%), and severe (30 and higher) in nine (7%). Half of the carers (64; 51%) reported three or fewer physical symptoms. Quality of sleep was rated as good by 57 (46%) of carers.

Depression was related (non-significantly) to age and female sex. Patient's behavioural disturbance, assessed by the behaviour and mood disturbance scale,¹ was the main independent correlate of carer's mood. An interaction of carers' affective state with carers' physical symptoms and poor quality of sleep was found; in depressed carers the frequency of physical symptoms and the quality of sleep were not influenced by patients' behavioural disturbance (table 1). In non-depressed carers the high frequency of behavioural disturbances was associated with poor perceived health—that is, more physical symptoms and poor quality of sleep. The two way interaction between depression and physical symptoms and between depression and quality of sleep was significant ($P=0.022$ and $P=0.019$ respectively on analysis of variance) even after carer's age, sex, living arrangements, number of people in the household, availability of a close confidant, number of hours of vigilance, and patient's age and score on the mini mental state examination were controlled for.

Our data suggest that patients' behavioural disturbances may act as a trigger for depression in a subgroup of carers; pre-existing characteristics of the carers could be risk factors for the development of depression, independent of demographic characteristics, social interactions, and burden of care.

ORAZIO ZANETTI

Deputy head

GIOVANNI B FRISONI

Staff neurologist

ANGELO BIANCHETTI

Head

Alzheimer's Dementia Research and Care Unit,
S Cuore-Fatebenefratelli Hospital,
Via Pilastroni 4,
25122 Brescia,
Italy

GIANCARLO TAMANZA

Professor of social psychology of the family

Universita' Cattolica del S Cuore,
Via Trieste 17,
Brescia

VITTORIO CIGOLI

Professor of social psychology

Universita' Cattolica del S Cuore
Largo Gemelli 1,
Milan

MARCO TRABUCCHI

Head

Geriatric Research Group,
Via Romanino 1,
Brescia

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Developing a policy on osteoporosis

Dual energy x ray absorptiometry may not be the gold standard

EDITOR,—I wish to comment on one aspect of the debate on the prevention of osteoporosis.¹ Implicit in much current thinking is the view that dual energy x ray absorptiometry of the spine and hip is the method of choice for bone

densitometry. The Advisory Group on Osteoporosis, for example, provided details only of the number of installations for this method in Britain. Those unfamiliar with the subject may assume that this is the only reputable type of densitometry.

I see many patients who, rightly or wrongly, have become concerned about the possibility of crippling osteoporosis in the future. Such patients should have bone densitometry to reassure them or to encourage them to take hormone replacement therapy. Others are referred after being told, often on inadequate evidence, that their symptoms result from osteoporosis. These patients, too, need densitometry to move their further investigation and treatment in a more rational direction. Do all these patients need dual energy x ray absorptiometry of the spine and hip?

If the object is to predict the overall risk of fracture then dual energy x ray absorptiometry of the hip and the spine has proved less effective than single photon absorptiometry of the calcaneus or distal radius.² It is often suggested that densitometric measurements should be made of only the "clinically relevant" parts. For assessments of the risk of vertebral fracture, however, dual energy x ray absorptiometry of the spine was found to be less effective than various measurements of the calcaneus, metacarpals, or phalanges and of similar effectiveness to densitometry of the distal radius.³ For assessments of the risk of hip fracture dual energy x ray absorptiometry of the upper femur was superior to other methods in one study but not in others, in which it was equalled or surpassed by ultrasonography of the calcaneus or densitometry of the distal radius.⁴

It is often forgotten that dual energy x ray absorptiometry of the spine is subject to interference from osteoarthritis, aortic calcification, and fractures; precision falls rapidly with age.⁵ Simpler methods of peripheral densitometry have good precision at all ages. Such methods may not only be more clinically appropriate but, being cheaper, allow more patients to be scanned for the same expenditure. The constant repetition, almost as a mantra, that dual energy x ray absorptiometry is the gold standard in densitometry should be questioned for the sake of both patients and taxpayers.

COLIN R PATERSON

Honorary consultant

Ninewells Hospital and Medical School,
Dundee DD1 9SY

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Clinical risk factors alone are insufficient in decision making

EDITOR,—In so fervently decrying the evil they perceive in widespread screening of bone mineral density Trevor A Sheldon and colleagues do a disservice to people with osteoporosis.¹ However much they protest to the contrary, their utterances are widely interpreted by both clinicians and public health physicians as indicating that no benefit will be derived from

measurements of bone mass under any circumstances. Such an extreme view is not justified in the light of present evidence, which indicates that measurement of bone mass is a useful predictor of the risk of fracture.² Furthermore, evidence shows that intervention with agents that increase bone mass leads to a reduction in the incidence of fractures.³ Hence measurement of bone mass is a useful if not mandatory prerequisite for the administration of such treatment. Indeed, it might even be argued that prescribing bone sparing treatment without measuring bone mass is akin to giving antihypertensive treatment to prevent stroke in patients who present with headache but whose blood pressure has not been measured.

Many clinical situations exist in which bone mass might be affected by the underlying disease process and clinical management would be influenced by its measurement. Clinical risk factors alone are insufficient to detect patients in such cases,⁴ and so to describe as a "semantic sidestep" the distinction of measurement of bone mass in such patients from screening shows a lack of insight into the processes involved in clinical decision making and management.

Our experience in a busy metabolic bone disease clinic suggests that the lack of appropriate facilities for measuring bone mass in the community can lead to inappropriate treatment based on unreliable criteria such as radiologically reported osteopenia. This not only exposes the patient to the potential hazards of unnecessary treatment but can also be costly: the cheapest proprietary combined hormone replacement therapy costs over £42 a year while more specific antiresorptive treatment can cost up to £334 a year (NHS prices, 1996). In our unit the cost of measuring bone mass is £50. Thus by preventing the use of the most expensive new treatments in one in six women in whom measurements are made the service will fully justify its cost.

PETER SELBY

Lecturer in medicine

MICHAEL DAVIES

Senior lecturer in medicine

University of Manchester Bone Disease Research Centre,
Manchester Bone Centre,
Manchester Royal Infirmary,
Manchester M13 9WL

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Bone densitometry is worth while

EDITOR,—Trevor A Sheldon and colleagues raise several controversial issues regarding the diagnostic value of measurements of bone density.¹ In many respects a bone densitometer is no more a diagnostic tool for osteoporosis than a measurement of blood pressure is for stroke or cardiovascular disease. In both instances the value measured is a risk factor. A favourable change in the relevant risk factor will reduce the risk of either a fracture or a cardiovascular event. Whether a clinician should use a measurement of either bone density or blood pressure to inform decisions about treatment should depend on an interaction between the accuracy of the test, its cost, the cost of treatment, the effectiveness of treatment, the incidence of the disease, and the severity and cost of the resulting disease that has not been prevented. In particular, the relation between the cost of the test and the cost of treat-