retention of urine, possibly because of the anticholinergic effect of tricyclic drugs.

These results are reassuring in that tricyclic antidepressants seem to be safe in the doses used in clinical practice. Although antidepressants are given for indications other than depression, the results are worrying because tricyclic antidepressants were mostly prescribed in low doses and both types of antidepressant were given only short term. These two factors mean that the treatment of major depression is less likely to be effective. Further research should determine why antidepressant drugs are prescribed in this way.

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Cross sectional database analysis of antidepressant prescribing in general practice in the United Kingdom, 1993-5

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See editorial
by Kendrick and
pp 858, 860

Consensus guidelines for the treatment of depression in general practice were published in 1992.¹ We investigated whether the prescription of antidepressants in general practice had changed since these guidelines and related educational materials had become available through the Defeat Depression Campaign and the Royal College of General Practitioners' senior mental health education fellowship.²

Methods and results

Cross sectional data for two periods of 12 months ending June 1993 and June 1995 were obtained from the database of the doctors' independent network (DIN-LINK); this is maintained by the independent company Compufile (Woking, Surrey), which provides general practice data mainly to the pharmaceutical industry. It contains data from 100 general practices (377 general practitioners, 750 000 patient records) across the United Kingdom that use AAH Meditel practice computer systems. Prescriptions for antidepressants linked to a general practitioner's diagnosis of

depression were included in the study. Antidepressants that accounted for less than 2% of the total were excluded. The effective dose of tricyclic antidepressants was taken as 125 mg daily from the consensus guidelines¹ and that of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors as the value in the manufacturers' data sheets.

Since 1993 the number of prescriptions issued for the treatment of depression increased overall by nearly 33%. The prescription rate for all antidepressants increased, but the increase was much lower in the older tricyclic antidepressants (12.4%) than in the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (133.8%). The number of people receiving an effective dose increased from 41% in 1993 to 53% in 1995. For amitriptyline, clomipramine, and dothiepin the percentage of prescriptions for an effective dose and the average dose prescribed changed only marginally (table 1).

Comment

In this large population the number of prescriptions for antidepressants issued to patients with a diagnosis of depression increased substantially between 1993 and 1995. We emphasise, however, that antidepressants are far from being the only effective treatment for depression.

Prescriptions for all antidepressants increased but more for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors than for tricyclic antidepressants. This suggests that general practitioners are not prescribing selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors to patients who have been taking tricyclic antidepressants long term.

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Table 1—Prescription of antidepressants to patients with diagnosis of depression

	Tricyclic antidepressants						Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors			
	Total	Amitriptyline	Clomipramine	Dothiepin	Total older tricyclics	Lofepramine	Fluoxetine	Paroxetine	Sertraline	Total
No of prescriptions:										
1993	58646	10763	2413	18777	31953	4864	5720	2710	1329	9759
1995	77738	11873	2693	21334	35900	6317	13675	6480	2657	22812
Increase in numbers (%) of prescriptions between 1993 and 1995	19092 (32.6)	1110 (10.3)	280 (11.6)	2557 (13.6)	3947 (12.4)	1453 (29.9)	7955 (139.1)	3770 (139.1)	1328 (99.9)	13053 (133.8)
1993:										
No of prescriptions with dose specified	37091	7754	1828	14383	23965	4090	5422	2523	1091	9036
No (%) of prescriptions at effective dose	15145 (40.8)	442 (5.7)	278 (15.2)	2188 (15.2)	2908 (12.1)	3205 (78.4)	5422 (100)	2519 (99.8)	1091 (100)	9032 (99.9)
1995:										
No of prescriptions with dose specified	52633	8193	1992	16847	27032	5318	13203	6101	1720	20283
No (%) of prescriptions at effective dose	28113 (53.4)	640 (7.8)	240 (12.1)	2666 (15.8)	3546 (13.1)	4309 (81.0)	13203 (100)	6076 (99.6)	1720 (100)	20258 (99.9)
Average dose (mg/day)*:										
1993		55.4	63.8	75.8		131.5	21.3	22.2	81.4	
1995		58.5	58.9	77.1		134.7	21.4	22.7	79.8	

*Based only on prescriptions with dose specified.

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Encouragingly, the percentage of patients receiving an effective dose of antidepressant increased, but this is accounted for entirely by the much greater increase in prescribing of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors than tricyclic antidepressants. Although for the older tricyclic antidepressants the proportion of prescriptions for an effective dose and the average doses prescribed were unchanged, we note that the *British National Formulary* still has not adopted the consensus guidelines on antidepressant doses. However, Kerr found that only 52% of general practitioners would prescribe tricyclic antidepressants at a dose lower than that recommended by the consensus guidelines³ compared with 86% in our study. This may reflect a difference between actual prescribing practice and what general practitioners say about their practice. Doctors may consider that low doses of tricyclic antidepressants offer effective treatment. They may be unaware of, or do not believe, the consensus guidelines or the results of clinical trials showing that tricyclic antidepressants prescribed at these doses are not beneficial in the treatment of depression. They may also lack confidence in prescribing at higher doses or fear that patients will find effective doses intolerable because of side effects.

So far as we are aware low doses of tricyclic

antidepressants are ineffective. Failure to treat depression effectively contributes to relapse and the development of recurrent and chronic depression¹ and may be a contributory factor in suicide.⁴ One study found that a large proportion of patients receiving long term treatment with antidepressants at low doses were still moderately to severely depressed during follow up.⁵ Further research is urgently needed to determine why general practitioners continue to prescribe tricyclic antidepressants at low doses and to investigate the consequences of such prescribing on a large scale.

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Statistics Notes

Interaction 3: How to examine heterogeneity

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This is the 26th in a series of occasional notes on medical statistics

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In preceding *Statistics Notes* we introduced the concept of interaction¹ and explained why a common approach to the assessment of interaction is incorrect.² In this note we give details of the correct approach using the same two examples.

In a study of the effect of maternal vitamin D supplementation on neonatal serum calcium concentrations³ the researchers were interested in the possible difference between the effect of supplementation on breast and bottle fed babies. We define the treatment effect in each feeding group to be the difference in the mean serum calcium concentration of babies receiving supplements and those receiving placebo in that group: the treatment means and observed effects in the feeding groups are given in table 1.

The first step is to compute the difference between the two treatment effects—that is, $0.10 - 0.04 = 0.06$ mmol/l. The standard error of this difference is 0.056 mmol/l, found from the standard errors of the separate effects using the usual method for the standard error of a difference.⁴ This is the same method that provides the standard error of a treatment effect from the standard errors of the treatment means. The P value can be found from the ratio of the difference to its standard error, namely

$0.06/0.056 = 1.07$, again using standard methods,⁴ which gives $P = 0.28$, showing there is no evidence that the effects are different between the two feeding groups. An approximate 95% confidence interval can be found for the difference in the treatment effects in the usual way,⁴—that is, as $0.06 \pm 1.96 \times 0.056$, or -0.05 to 0.17 mmol/l.

A similar approach is adopted with a binary outcome measure. In a controlled trial of antenatal steroid therapy for neonatal respiratory distress syndrome 27.3% (9/33) of babies born to mothers with pre-eclampsia and 14.1% (37/262) of babies born to mothers without pre-eclampsia in the control group developed neonatal respiratory distress syndrome; the corresponding figures in the steroid group were 21.2% (7/33) and 7.9% (21/267) respectively.⁵ Once standard errors of each of these percentages have been found in the usual way⁴ the method for assessing an interaction between steroid therapy and mother's pre-eclampsia is the same as for continuous outcomes. The treatment effect in babies of mothers with pre-eclampsia is $27.3 - 21.2 = 6.1\%$ (standard error 10.5%) and in babies born to unaffected mothers it is $14.1 - 7.9 = 6.2\%$ (standard error 2.7%), so the difference in treatment effects is $6.2 - 6.1 = 0.1\%$ (standard error 10.9%), from which the P value for the difference in treatment effects is $P = 0.99$. Thus there is no evidence in this trial that the effect of antenatal steroids depends on whether the mother suffered from pre-eclampsia: the 95% confidence interval for the difference in the treatment effects can also be constructed as before, giving $0.1 \pm 1.96 \times 10.9$ or -21.3% to 21.5% .

Table 1—Serum calcium concentrations (mmol/l) at 1 week in babies born to mothers given vitamin D supplements or placebo and analysed according to whether they were breast fed or bottle fed

Serum calcium	Breast fed		Bottle fed	
	Supplement	Placebo	Supplement	Placebo
Treatment mean	2.45	2.41	2.30	2.20
Standard error	0.036	0.032	0.022	0.019
No	64	102	169	285
Treatment effect		0.04		0.10
Standard error		0.048		0.029
P value		0.40		0.0006

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