

PRESS RELEASE

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Research links Panorama investigations to rise in adverse drug reports by UK doctors

The number of adverse reactions reported by UK doctors to the antidepressant paroxetine – often know by its brand name Seroxat - rose by 61 per cent after three editions of the BBC's award-winning current affairs programme Panorama explored increasing concerns about the drug.

Research just published in the **British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology** shows a sudden increase in reports immediately after each of the three programmes were aired in the UK in October 2002, May 2003 and October 2004.

Five regulatory announcements made in the UK during the same period resulted in a much smaller five per cent increase in reports of adverse reactions.

The research team from the Department of Social Medicine at Bristol University, UK, explored prescribing patterns and adverse drug reports for paroxetine, which is part of a group of drugs called SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors).

“Our analysis of adverse drug reports made by doctors suggests that negative publicity, particularly the three Panorama programmes, were associated with marked, short-term peaks in reporting” says lead author Dr Richard Martin.

“In the months before and after the three Panorama programmes were aired adverse reports went up from 8.3 to 13.4 per 100,000 prescriptions. The change before and after regulatory announcements went from 7.6 to 8.0.”

SSRI's are used to treat patients with depression. They work by raising levels of the important chemical serotonin which helps to regulate communications (electrical activity) in the regions of the brain thought to be affected by depression.

The initial Panorama programme followed two announcements by the US Food and Drug Administration. The first announcement, in January 2002, warned of severe withdrawal symptoms from paroxetine and the second, in October 2002, suggested links between the drug and suicidal behaviour.

“Overall prescribing of paroxetine started to fall gradually after the FDA's warning was publicised in the UK” adds Dr Martin. “Prescribing patterns were not as obviously affected by media attention and regulatory announcements as the reporting of adverse drug reactions, but they may have helped to maintain the decline.”

More...

Panorama is the BBC's award-winning flagship current affairs programme. First broadcast in 1953, it is the longest-running public affairs TV programme in the world.

The programme has won numerous awards, including a Mental Health Media Award in 2003 for its first two investigations into the safety of paroxetine (Seroxat).

"The documentaries showed just how powerful the voice of mental health service users and survivors can be, fuelling furious public and media debate whilst demonstrating that broadcasters can both sensitively and successfully reach and touch the lives of the wider public" said the Mental Health Media Award.

Dr Martin agrees that the programmes had an impact and says that the research carried out by the team at Bristol University shows clearly how the programmes had a marked effect on the reporting of adverse effects of paroxetine.

However, the effect of the programmes on reporting was only short term, highlighting the importance of continued efforts to improve the way adverse drug reactions to widely prescribed drugs are monitored.

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Notes to editors

- Did intense media publicity impact on prescribing of paroxetine and the notification of suspected adverse drug reactions? Analysis of routine databases, 2001 -2004. Richard M Martin, Margaret May and David Gunnell, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol UK. **British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology**. Volume 61.2, pages 224-228. (February 2006).
- The **British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology** is published monthly on behalf of the British Pharmacological Society by Blackwell Publishing. It contains papers and reports on all aspects of drug action in humans: invited review articles, original papers, short communications and correspondence. The Journal, which was first published in 1974, enjoys a wide readership, bridging the gap between the medical profession, clinical research and the pharmaceutical industry.

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