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Mental health?

The European Union is launching a major mental health programme (1) focusing on early diagnosis and management of a range of disorders. But what treatments are available to the patients thus identified? After all, what's the point of a screening programme in the first place if we have no effective treatments?

Take the example of the two psychotropic drugs reviewed in this issue.

Risperidone is now licensed for the treatment of behavioural disorders in children who are autistic or mentally disabled (see page 43). Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether risperidone is slightly more or slightly less effective than haloperidol or lithium, as it has only been compared with placebos in clinical trials. Extrapyramidal effects are claimed to be less of a problem with risperidone, yet they still affect about 25% of children treated for a year. Risperidone makes children drowsy and causes weight gain in about 50% of cases. Its long-term effects on growth and psychological development

have not been studied at all. Is this the sort of clinical research that children really need?

Venlafaxine has been granted a third indication, for adults with social phobia. Large-scale trials, some versus paroxetine, showed no advantage of this drug. Venlafaxine has the same unwanted effects as serotonin reuptake inhibitor antidepressants, and it also carries a risk of severe cardiovascular effects. Is this the type of new drug that adults with mental disorders really need?

When it comes to mental health the European authorities would be well advised to encourage need-oriented drug research and development, and to focus on the number one priority: prevention.

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1- "Mental health. Launch of an EU-wide consultation process on mental health" Website <http://europa.eu.int> accessed 11/12/2005 (full address: http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental_health_en.htm).

PRESCRIRE'S RATING SYSTEM

Our judgement is based on the therapeutic advance of the new product. It considers not only the inherent value of each product in terms of its risk-benefit balance, but also its advantages and disadvantages relative to existing products available in France. Note that the relative value of new products can vary from one country to another.



BRAVO: The product is a major therapeutic advance in an area where previously no treatment was available.



A REAL ADVANCE: The product is an important therapeutic innovation but has certain limitations.



OFFERS AN ADVANTAGE: The product has some value but does not fundamentally change the present therapeutic practice.



POSSIBLY HELPFUL: The product has minimal additional value, and should not change prescribing habits except in rare circumstances.



NOTHING NEW: The product may be a new substance but is superfluous because it does not add to the clinical possibilities offered by previous products available. In most cases it concerns a me-too product.



JUDGEMENT RESERVED: The editors postpone their rating until better data and a more thorough evaluation of the drug are available.



NOT ACCEPTABLE: Product without evident benefit but with potential or real disadvantages.