

Media Release

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Depression and medical illness common

Depression in patients with medical illness is common and may often be overlooked, according to an article published in the August edition of *Australian Prescriber*.

According to Dr James Olver and Professor Graham Burrows of the Department of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne, the relationship between depression and medical illness is complex. Either the medical illness can cause the depression, or the depression was already present but was difficult to recognise.

Around 30% of patients attending a neurological clinic had significant symptoms of depressive illness and the depression was unrecognised by the physician in up to 72%. The prevalence of depression following acute ischaemic heart disease may be as high as 30%. In cancer patients after the diagnosis, the risk of depression is as high as 55%.

“The diagnosis of depression in the presence of medical illness is frequently missed, often resulting in unnecessary investigations and procedures, increased disability and increased costs to the community,” said Dr Olver. “An accurate diagnosis will require a careful history of the onset, course and severity of the depressive symptoms”.

The authors write that “the assessment of both conditions and the interaction between them is critical in managing these patients. When the symptoms are mild, psychotherapy may be sufficient. However, for more severe depression antidepressants may be required, or referral to a psychiatrist.”

Many patients will be on multiple medications for their underlying physical disorder and the prescribing doctor should consider drug interactions. In order to minimise adverse effects, medications should be started at low doses and adjusted slowly.

A collaborative approach with all the professionals treating the patient, and a good rapport with the patient and their family are essential.

To read the article visit the *Australian Prescriber* website www.australianprescriber.com

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About Australian Prescriber

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