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Prescribing in the elderly

Background

Balancing medication use in the elderly is a complex task, made more difficult by the physiological changes and increased burden of disease seen with aging.

Objective

This article reviews recent literature and outlines the basic principles and problems of medication use in older people, and provides potential strategies to optimise prescribing.

Discussion

Competing risks and benefits complicate medication use in the elderly. General practitioners need to be aware of these risks and benefits in order to tailor the most appropriate treatment regimen to each individual patient.

Keywords: aging; prescriptions; drugs; drug utilisation; quality of health care; therapeutics



With the first of the 'baby boomer' generation turning 65 this year, and an estimated one in four Australians projected to be aged over 65 years by 2050, Australia's population is aging rapidly.^{1,2} This brings great challenges to primary care. In addition to being aware of the physiological changes of aging and their potential sequelae, general practitioners must balance the increasing complexity of comorbid diseases, target polypharmacy, and remain vigilant to potential medication misuse.

Physiological changes with aging

Age related changes in pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics lead to a reduction in physiologic reserves. This leaves elderly patients particularly vulnerable to the potential complications of polypharmacy. The major pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic changes associated with aging are outlined in Table 1.^{3,4}

In addition, differences in receptor numbers and binding affinities (eg. down regulation of cardiac beta-1 adrenergic receptors),⁵ changes in target organ responses and impaired compensatory reflexes (eg. autonomic blood pressure control) also result in less predictable outcomes.⁶ Under appreciation of these changes may contribute to inappropriate dosing, inadequate monitoring and increased adverse drug reactions.^{7,8}

Polypharmacy

The physiological changes that come with aging are often compounded by an increasing number of chronic conditions necessitating multiple medications. Although lacking a consensus definition, polypharmacy is commonly described as the 'concurrent use of more than anywhere between four and 10 medications'.⁹ This definition however, neglects to take into account the number of comorbid diseases legitimately requiring treatment, and risks oversimplifying the issue and encouraging inappropriate underprescribing. An alternative definition of polypharmacy is 'the use of more medications than are clinically indicated'.⁹⁻¹²

Up to two-thirds of people aged over 60 years are prescribed in excess of four medications.¹³ This 'pill burden' increases with age, especially in residents of aged care facilities.¹⁴ Other factors associated with polypharmacy include female gender, number of diagnoses, recent hospitalisation, and depression.¹⁵ The most

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Michael Rajnik



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