Catatonia and NMS

Sir: The grand rounds report of catatonia by Carey et al (Psychiatric Bulletin, February 2002, 26, 68–70) is a useful reminder that our knowledge of catatonia has progressed since its 19th-century delineations. However, the report only partially reflects this progress.

Catatonia is not rare when patients are systematically assessed for motor abnormalities. Kraepelin reported 20% of his patients with dementia praecox to be catatonic (see Fink & Taylor, 2003) and surveys since 1990 find that about 10% of acutely hospitalised psychiatric patients meet DSM criteria for catatonia (Bush et al, 1996a).

The official linking of catatonia and schizophrenia in classification systems is a misreading of the literature. Kahlbaum described the characteristic motor signs of catatonia among patients diagnosed as suffering from both mood and general medical illnesses (see Fink & Taylor, 2003). Kraepelin and Bleuler incorporated the syndrome to serve their view of dementia praecox (see Fink & Taylor, 2003). Since 1920, however, studies of catatonic subjects find 40–60% with an underlying mood disorder, whereas only 15% have schizophrenia. The clinical information in the report suggests that the patient’s 1998 condition was a psychotic depression, for which his clinicians later prescribed lithium.

The report cites the vigorous use of antipsychotic drugs leading to neuroleptic malignant syndrome (NMS). The authors are unsure as to the relation between NMS and catatonia, first suggesting NMS to be distinguishable from catatonia and later stating that ‘features common to both catatonia and NMS are increasingly recognised, with NMS felt to closely represent advanced catatonia’. We agree with the latter interpretation as attempts to demarcate the two syndromes have failed and the syndrome is induced by drugs other than neuroleptics. The more parsimonious view, based on the similarity of signs, symptoms and response to treatments, argues that NMS and malignant catatonia are best considered as one disorder (Fink, 1996).

Successful interventions for catatonia began with the demonstration in 1930 that intravenous barbiturates resolve catatonic stupor. In 1935, patients with catatonic schizophrenia were reported to recover when treated with chemically induced seizures (now electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)). The barbiturates were replaced by the benzodiazepines that are now reported as effective in 80% of catatonic patients (Bush et al, 1996b). When these drugs fail, especially in patients with malignant catatonia or delirious maria, ECT is remarkably effective (Fink, 1999).

The use of antipsychotic drugs in patients with catatonia is problematic. A malignant syndrome is associated with antipsychotic drugs, especially among patients with a medical illness, fever and dehydration. Rising serum creatine-phosphokinase and falling serum iron levels are findings that antecede the emergence of the malignant catatonia/NMS syndrome. The present report illustrates this hazard, as high potency antipsychotic drugs prescribed during the acute psychotic episode were associated with an NMS syndrome, relieved as ‘benzodiazepines and anticholinergic medication were required on a number of occasions’. With ECT, the patient ‘improved swiftly and substantially’. The continuation treatment with antipsychotic drugs was not helpful, requiring a second course of ECT. The avoidance of potent antipsychotic drugs and the prescription of diazepam probably contributed to his ongoing well-being.


Max Fink Professor of Psychiatry, Long Island Jewish Medical Center, P.O. Box 457, St James, New York 11780, USA, Michael A. Taylor Professor of Psychiatry, University of Health Sciences/The Chicago Medical School, Illinois, USA

Sir: We read with interest Carey et al’s description (Psychiatric Bulletin, February 2002, 26, 68–70) of a patient with catatonia and neuroleptic malignant syndrome (NMS). We have also recently treated a patient for both conditions.

Our patient was a 48-year-old woman who had suffered an intracranial bleed at birth resulting in left-sided hemiplegia and mild learning disability. Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder, manic type, was made at the age of 16 years. She had only four previous admissions, most recent in 1983, and had been effectively treated with thioridazine.

She developed a florid psychosis following the change from thioridazine to quetiapine (as per Committee on Safety of Medicines guidelines) and the treatment of menopausal hot flushes with clonidine. Treatment was again changed, this time to chlorpromazine. Four days later, she developed NMS. When the NMS symptoms resolved, she remained mute, akinetic, doubly incontinent and had poor fluid intake for 4 weeks, with no evidence of psychosis. Resolution occurred spontaneously after listening to her favourite tape, Beatles. Since the resolution of the catatonia, she has suffered repeated epileptic seizures of all types. However, there is a history of falls in the months prior to admission.

Our case raised several important diagnostic and management issues. The general psychiatric staff (nursing and doctors) attributed the early signs of NMS to a combination of this patient’s learning disability, mental illness and hemiplegia. The medical team believed her symptoms were ‘behavioural’ and attributed the raised creatine-phosphokinase to a fall 1 month earlier. Once they accepted the diagnosis of NMS, diagnosed by the learning disability team, she was transferred back to the psychiatric unit and care was by the in-patient staff and community learning disability team.

Management was purely supportive while there was no evidence of a disturbed mental state or deterioration in physical health, since there appeared to be no clear consensus in the literature about the treatment of catatonia and the family had concerns about the use of medication and electroconvulsive therapy. The thioridazine was restarted slowly...
after a normal electrocardiogram at the request of the family, when the psychosis re-emerged. A literature search also suggested this was a suitable drug following NM5. Sodium valproate was added for treatment of the epilepsy but has also been a very effective mood stabiliser.

Interestingly, when the patient emerged from her catatonic state, she used the hemiplegic arm without any difficulties for a few days before it returned to a spastic premorbid position. Finally, the family are extremely pleased with the patient's progress, believing her mental state to be the best they have ever seen it and this is echoed by all staff who have known this woman.

Jennifer Dolman Specialist Registrar, Rosemary Baker Consultant Psychiatrist, Learning Disability Service, The Holies, Parklands Hospital, Aldermaston Road, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG24 9RH

Clinical capacity assessment

Sir: Dr Raymont (Psychiatric Bulletin, February 2002, 26, 201–204) is right to draw to our attention the complexities involved in the legal basis of our ministrations to the patient who may lack the capacity to give informed consent. We especially welcome discussion of the issue of belief and insight in this philosophical, legal and ethical morass, although we would have liked to see elaboration of terms like 'full insight' and 'greater level of capacity'. However, a particular suggestion made us wince.

Dr Raymont answers her own question, 'So how can we proceed currently with any physical treatment of those who lack capacity?' with 'Certainly a full psychiatric assessment should be made initially' – apparently before life-saving treatment. This presumably applies to many with major stroke or an acute cardiac event, a large number of the 30–60% admitted to medical wards with dementia or delirium (Ramsay et al, 1991; Treloar & Macdonald, 1997), a high proportion of all those in nursing homes (Macdonald et al, 2002) and every single unconscious patient. If by 'psychiatric assessment' she includes presenting complaint, history of presenting complaint, collateral history, and so on by mental health professionals, we wonder what all these professionals will come from?

Apart from this practical problem, we object on principle to the growing tendency for physicians and surgeons to involve psychiatrists in judgements about capacity to consent. Under current UK law (as opposed to some of the US jurisdictions in which the MacArthur Competence Assessment Tool for Treatment (MacCAT-T) (Appelbaum & Grisso, 1998) was developed) it is not necessary to diagnose the cause of any impaired capacity in order to make the judgement that it is impaired. All professionals must surely be able to make such judgements in relation to each decision, great or small, confronting their patient if they are not to be constantly exposed to accusations of battery on the one hand or neglect of duty of care on the other.

Each trust must ensure that its doctors are competent to assess capacity and have policies in place for treatment when capacity is lacking. It is the responsibility of every treating physician to gain the informed consent for the treatment they are delivering and to take appropriate measures if they do not believe the person to have that capacity. These include timely interventions to save life and, when more leisurely interventions are allowed, involving the relatives, consulting colleagues (almost never a psychiatrist) and other measures, in accord with the Bolam standard (Bolam v. Friern, 1957).


Bolam v. Friern. Hospital Management Committee [1957] 2ALLER118, 1W:R 582.

Chris Ball Consultant, Old Age Psychiatry, Alastair Macdonald Professor of Old Age Psychiatry, Kings College London, Ladywell House, 330 Lewisham High Street, London SE13 6LZ

Off-label prescribing

Sir: We enjoyed reading the article by Lawrence et al (Psychiatric Bulletin, June 2002, 26, 230–232). The findings complement some work that we have done in this area (Lowie-Ponsford, Psychiatric Bulletin, 2000, 24, 415–417). Our postal questionnaire found that 65% of psychiatrists who replied had prescribed 'off-label' within the preceding month.

Medico-legal advice that we obtained (from the Medical Protection Society) was that, not only does Bolam (1957) need to be taken into account, but also the case of Bolitho (1997). This judgement means that the treatment has to withstand logical analysis as well as be accepted by a body of opinion. These considerations need to be taken into account in prescribing, alongside the capacity of the patient.

Many psychiatrists are worried about off-label prescribing and our study suggested that 4% of respondents had received complaints about this matter. In our paper, we suggested some guidelines that may avoid many future medico-legal problems for clinicians if they should prescribe off-label.

The College’s Psychopharmacology Special Interest Group has discussed this matter and is setting up a small working group (chaired by D. B.) to review the practice of off-label prescribing. We would be delighted to receive the thoughts of colleagues on this subject.

Bolam v. Friern. Hospital Management Committee [1957] 2ALLER118, 1W:R 582.

Bolitho v. City and Hackney Health Authority [1997] 3WLR1151.

Francesca Lowe-Ponsford Locum Consultant Psychiatrist, Box 317, Adrain House, Falbourn Hospital, Cambridge CB1 5EF. David Baldwin Senior Lecturer in Psychiatry, University Department of Mental Health, Royal South Hants Hospital, Brintons Terrace, Southampton SO14 0YG

Community psychiatry in Nigeria


Although separated by historical period, civilization and culture, it is interesting to compare this scheme to a similar one in a developing country. The ‘Aro village’ in Nigeria is set in a semi-rural culture, and operated by the Department of Psychiatry, University of Ibidan. It was pioneered by Professor Adeoye Lambo, an eminent psychiatrist who later became the Deputy-Director of The World Health Organization. This initiative was the very first attempt in community psychiatry in Nigeria (Boroffka & Olatuwura, 1976).

As in the case of the north Powys project, Aro village was adapted from the already existing infrastructure of a village community. It offered a social model of care and a rich rehabilitation resource.

Community confidence in the scheme was achieved through liaison between the psychiatrists and the community leaders, a delicate balance between traditionalists and Western psychiatry, a relationship based on trust and the prospect of mutual benefits from the project. In return, the Aro village witnessed infrastructural developments and on-site health clinics. Among other research interests, the project was the subject of an international research collaboration by Leighton et al, 1963.
In a self-funded health economy, patients and their families paid for lodging in the village. The period of stay was longer, at times it ran into years, and some patients relocated to live permanently in the village.

Finally, the benefits were not couched in terms of econometrics, but in the confidence of the rural community to embrace the, then, alien Western psychiatry.


Ade Adewunmi Consultant Psychiatrist, Calderstones Hospital, Mitton Road, Whalley, Clitheroe, Lancashire BB7 9PE

Military psychiatry

Sir: Military psychiatry is, as Greenberg et al (Psychiatric Bulletin, June 2002, 26, 227–229) suggest, a unique national resource. I agree (Psychiatric Bulletin, July 1997, 21, 418–421) that it should focus on those areas in which it can justify claim expertise.

Greenberg et al state that military psychiatry is essentially occupational and they mention its ‘ethical and moral’ challenges. As a serving Officer, I was certainly aware of ethical tensions. On the whole, service personnel came to see me as a psychiatrist, not as an occupational physician. The occupational role, however, meant that under certain circumstances I had to act, not primarily in the best interests of the patient, but to safeguard the military. This possibility was not made explicit. Yet, military patients had few options but to be seen by military psychiatrists.

In civilian life, we can make more autonomous decisions concerning whom we see. The role of the occupational physician is explicit. Doctors only normally act against the wishes of their patients when there are substantial risks associated with not doing so. This is not always the case in the military, because the rules relating to mental illness are attuned to the needs of the organisation, not to personal needs. For understand- able (but none the less stigmatising) reasons, the military environment is intolerant of what it perceives as mental illness. So, there can be an ethical tension between the occupational role and the therapeutic inclination. This ethical dilemma is another unique feature of military psychiatry and one that it would be interesting to see addressed.

Julian C. Hughes Gipside Unit, Centre for the Health of the Elderly, Newcastle General Hospital, Westgate Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE4 6BE

Overseas candidates for the MRCPsych examination


The major findings of their study were: (1) doctors from the UK/Ireland fare much better than their counterparts from the rest of the world; and (2) the older the candidate, the lower the likelihood of success.

I would like to focus on the first point. In addition to the putative explanatory factors put forward by the authors to account for this finding, I would like to consider a few more. Compared to UK/Ireland graduates, overseas doctors are more likely to work in non-teaching hospitals for the whole of their basic specialist training. This will obviously impact on the quality of training they receive and, therefore, their level of preparedness to face the MRCPsych examination. Also, a not insignificant number of overseas trainees are forced by circumstances to take up non-career grade posts for visa purposes: permitt-free training (PFT) visas for senior house officers (SHOs) are usually given by the Home Office for a total of 4 years. Understandably, for some, this period is insufficient to pass the examination. The overseas doctor, who sits his subsequent attempts at the MRCPsych examination as a staff grade, will obviously not have the same access to exam-related training as an SHO.

A study that controls for these potential confounding factors (Hospital of training: teaching v non-teaching, and post of the candidate: training v non-career grade) may be able to provide a more accurate picture.

From Table 1, in the Part I examination, 74% (305/410) of UK/Ireland graduates passed the multiple choice question (MCQ) examination compared with 57% (408/718) of overseas graduates, an absolute difference of 17%. Among those successful in the MCQ component, 85% (206/305) in the UK/Ireland group and 54% (219/408) in the overseas group were also successful in the clinical component, an absolute difference of 31%. Why does the gulf in the clinical component, an absolute difference between the two groups widen from 17–31% in just a few weeks between the written and clinical examinations? Is the clinical examination unintentionally biased against the overseas trainee?

Another striking statistic in the study is the relative percentage of overseas candidates appearing in the Part I and Part II examinations. Although in Part I, 64% (718/1128) are foreign graduates, in Part II this drops sharply to just 47% (357/763) with a corresponding increase in the UK/Ireland group from 36–53%. There may be several reasons for this, for example inability to pass Part I dropping out of psychiatry or moving to non-training posts. Perhaps this is an area for further investigation?

It should not be forgotten that the Professional and Linguistics Assessment Board (PLAB) test, which most overseas doctors have to pass to work in the UK, is comprehensive and recognised to be of a high standard.

Finally, the College needs to be appreciated for its transparency in publishing the details relating to the MRCPsych examination. Also, it is encouraging to learn that there is going to be greater standardisation of the examination with the introduction of more reliable sections.

Sundararajan Rajagopal Specialist Registrar, Department of Liaison Psychiatry, Guy’s Hospital, York Clinic, Westton Street, London SE1 3RR

Examination performance feedback

Sir: At present, only candidates who fail the College Membership examination are provided with performance feedback. The feedback is most useful, detailed and helpful in illustrating not only areas of weakness but also positive aspects in the failed performance. The information provided is invaluable to one’s success in future attempts.

We believe that it is equally important that successful candidates are given the same opportunity to scrutinise their performance through similarly constructive feedback from the College.

The margin between success and failure may be only slight in a sizeable minority of cases and it is clear that, even after a success, room for improvement remains. With a detailed breakdown of one’s performance, there could be at least some pointers for future learning.

We should stress that this suggestion is made with the intention of enhancing one’s knowledge of one’s abilities, certainly not to provide grounds for appeal nor to provide information for the construction of specialist registrar league tables! There is, naturally, a possibility that such a move may result in the deflation of one’s moment of triumph. However, this can be avoided by allowing sufficient time between the euphoria of success and arrival of the detailed feedback for the successful candidates.

T. Glover Specialist Registrar, E. Salib Consultant in Old Age Psychiatry, Hollins Park Hospital, Hollins Park, Warrington