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Print Edition

Study backs kids' drug-suicide link

BY JAMIE TALAN
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Amid growing concern that antidepressants could lead some children to attempt suicide, scientists set out to test whether these fears are justified.

They are, according to a new study.

Dr. Mark Olfson and colleagues at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University Medical Center used a Medicaid database of patients hospitalized with severe depression. They used more than 5,000 in the study, which is in the Archives of General Psychiatry, separating out a group of children aged 6 to 18, and a group of adults - and those who attempted suicide or succeeded. Then, they found five times as many patients who met the same criteria, but had not committed suicide or attempted it. At that point, they went back and looked to see who had taken antidepressants.

They discovered that young people who attempted suicide were 1.5 times more likely to have been on an antidepressant. And although only eight children actually took their own lives, they found that they were 15 times more likely to have been on antidepressants. Children who took their own lives were far more likely to have been taking a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, SSRIs, like Zoloft and Paxil.

This study adds to mounting evidence of a link between the popular class of SSRIs and an increased risk for suicide in young people. In 2004, the Food and Drug Administration issued a health advisory that included a black box warning so that health care providers consult families before children are prescribed these drugs.

If suicidal thoughts do occur, it is generally in the first weeks or months on the drugs. Parents are advised to keep a close eye on the child and report any unusual symptoms or thoughts expressed by the child.

The Columbia study found no added suicidal risk among the adults studied.

"Children are not little adults," said Dr. Gabrielle Carlson, director of child and adolescent psychiatry at Stony Brook School of Medicine. "This is not a big effect," she added, although she labeled the finding "sobering." "What do parents do with this information? They talk to their child's doctor and weigh the benefits of taking these medicines and the risks," she said.

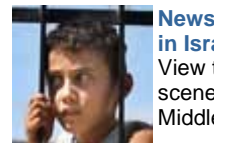
Olfson said there is probably a link between the drugs' side effect and the chemistry of the younger brain.

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