

Contemporary Concepts Review

Psychotropic medication in chronic spinal disorders

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Abstract

**BACKGROUND CONTEXT:** Optimal treatment of nonmalignant chronic spinal disorders (CSDs) may require the use of one or more nonopioid psychotropic medications. Vast research literature has documented high rates of psychiatric disorders in patients with CSDs. Psychotropic medications are one type of effective treatment for these disorders. Many medications of this type are also used as adjuvants to primary analgesic medications.

**PURPOSE:** Physicians treating CSDs may have little training and experience in prescribing psychotropic medications. Further, they may possess limited information about the efficacy of these types of medications in treating psychiatric disorders comorbid with CSDs or as adjunctive analgesics. Because of the wide variety (antidepressants, anxiolytics, sleep-promoting agents, anticonvulsants, neuroleptics, muscle relaxants) and numerous indications for psychiatric medications, a concise review of the use of psychotropic medications with CSD patients is offered for the spine specialist. **STUDY DESIGN:** A systematic review of the contemporary English literature on psychotropic medications in the CSD population.

**METHODS:** A computerized search of MEDLINE was performed on all English literature published from 1982 to August 2002.

**RESULTS:** Psychotropic medications have been found to be very efficacious in the large subgroup of patients with CSDs with psychiatric comorbidity, particularly patients with the common constellation of depression, anxiety, excessive somatic complaints, insomnia and irritability. Although the type of medication indicated depends on the particular psychiatric syndrome(s), antidepressants have been found to be extremely useful with the constellation described above. There is less evidence to support the use of nonopioid psychotropic medications in the treatment of nociceptive pain, although clinical experience indicates that some individuals demonstrate a marked analgesic response. Research support for the efficacy of particular psychotropic medications in treating neuropathic pain is stronger, although more controlled research is clearly needed.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Psychotropic medications are extremely useful in the treatment of psychiatric disorders comorbid with CSDs and modestly useful as analgesic adjuvants, particularly with pain of neuropathic etiology. Familiarity with these medications will aid the primary treating physician in optimizing outcomes in this difficult group of patients. © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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FDA device/drug status: not applicable.

Nothing of value received from a commercial entity related to this research.

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Introduction

Optimal treatment of nonmalignant chronic spinal disorders (CSDs) often requires the use of one or more psychotropic medications (PMs). Vast research literature has documented high rates of psychiatric disorders in patients with CSDs [1]. PMs are one type of effective treatment for these disorders. Many PMs are also used to manage the pain that is typically associated with CSDs, including pain of both nociceptive and neuropathic origins. Opioid medications, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)