

Exploring A Dementia Caregiver's Experience: A Case Study of Medication-Related Aggression

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Background

- Due to global aging, there is a rising number of people living with dementia, most of whom rely on support from caregivers
- Donepezil, a dementia medication, is known to induce agitation and aggressive behavior as a side effect
- The impact of these aggressive behaviors on caregivers of dementia patients has not been sufficiently researched

Research Objective

The objective of this case study was to understand what implications medication-related aggression may have on the caregiver's well being

Methods

Parent study (Better Together: Dementia Care Study) approved by IRB# HS-19-00282

Parent Study

- Study on conflict within dementia caregiving
- Enrolled caregivers of persons living with all types of dementia
- Conducted 90-minute 1-on-1 semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed

Case Study Sample

Number of participants: 1

- One participant was selected for this case study, who had experienced aggression following the initiation of donepezil
- Caregiver, CK, was a 66-year-old female, caring for her husband of 37 years, a 67-year old male
- CK had been providing care for roughly six years

Case Study Design

- Secondary analysis of an interview transcript

Data Analysis

- Qualitative Content Analysis
- A analysis of the interview transcript, intended to: (1) search for themes, (2) define themes, and (3) provide analytical write-up

Results

Three themes emerged during analysis: (1) **CK's context** related to her caregiving at the time of the donepezil prescription; (2) CK's comments related to **her husband's aggression** following the donepezil initiation; and (3) **CK's reaction** to the aggression, regarding the events and her thoughts on initiating donepezil in the first place.

Caregiver's Context

CK was isolated and reported negative impacts to her mental health related to her caregiving.

"I pretty much was completely on my own during that time."

"...my daughter isn't necessarily supportive in the way I need her to be."

"Like I say, there's a lot on my plate. It's not conducive to my health or mental health."

"...there are times that I really, really struggle."

Medication-Related Aggression

The aggression exhibited by CK's husband was jarring to CK and escalated over time, eventually resulting in a hospital visit related to injuries he inflicted on her.

"My husband changed insurance and they took him off of galantamine, which he'd been on since his diagnosis, and put him on donepezil, and he became violent."

"...definitely with the Donepezil he would get angry. And I mean, like one time he slammed me up against the wall."

"But, you know, a couple of times he grabbed my arms and twisted them. One time he grabbed one finger and pulled it back to where I honestly was afraid it was going to break."

"An Alzheimer's care coordinator found out and said, oh, yeah, take him off of it now. Don't give him another pill."

Caregiver's Reaction

The idea of her husband's aggression being linked to the donepezil caused distress in CK, and made her regret agreeing to have the donepezil initiated.

"The donepezil, I had a long talk with the doctor before we ever, you know, put him on that. And, you know, he assured me it's like, oh, no, it's just the same as galantamine. No, everything will be fine."

"I would never have even thought that there would be a problem. You know, I was just afraid of him going off the galantamine, not have him going on to something different."

"Ugh! Donepezil."

"I would think that the neurologist would have mentioned something like that. And he said nothing."

Discussion

- The literature focuses on donepezil's linkage to aggressive behaviors and highlights case studies about the aggression occurring.
- The impact of these aggressive behaviors on the caregiver was severe in this case study, which warrants greater consideration of the impact this prescription may have on a dementia patient's support system.
- While aggression can occur in all people living with dementia, this did not mitigate CK attributing these behaviors to donepezil once she was made aware of this potential side effect.

Conclusions/Next Steps

- With highly impactful side effects, prescribing practitioners should take care to ensure a patient with dementia's care team is well informed.
- Additional caregiver-focused research into the impact of medication-related aggression could be of great benefit to improving caregiver well-being.

Limitations

- Data represents the opinions and experiences of an individual participating in a larger study and may not be representative of other caregivers in the same situation.
- Limited sample size: one
- Cannot demonstrate cause and effect

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