

NEWS

USA to improve care of children with ADHD

Citing recent studies that indicate a sharp rise in the use of psychotropic drugs to treat young children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other behavioural problems, the Clinton administration has launched an initiative to improve the care of children with emotional and behavioural disorders.

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton outlined the initiative at a March 20 White House meeting of health professionals, educators, policy makers, and representatives of patients' advocacy groups. "We are not here to bash the use of these medicines", Rodham Clinton said. "They have literally been a godsend for countless adults and young children with behavioural and emotional problems." But more research is needed into the effects of these drugs on the young, into whether they are being used appropriately, and "why we aren't doing a better job with combining drugs, when necessary, with family therapy and other behaviour modifications", she said.

In her comments, Rodham Clinton cited a recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that looked at the use of antidepressants and of methylphenidate and cloni-

dine in three groups of patients. The study found that, between 1991 and 1995, prescriptions of methylphenidate for children aged 19 years and younger rose between two-fold and three-fold. The greatest increased use was seen in teenagers, but use of the drug had also risen by more than 150% in children aged 2–4 years. None of these drugs has been approved for use in children younger than 6 years, and little is known of their safety and efficacy in this age group (*JAMA* 2000; **283**: 1025–30).

The initiative will include four federal programmes. First, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will begin work on designing new research protocols to develop paediatric dosage information on drugs such as methylphenidate. Second, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) will allocate more than US\$5 million for research into ADHD and the use of methylphenidate in preschool children. Third, NIMH will issue new fact

sheets to help parents get appropriate treatment for their children with behavioural problems. And finally, this autumn, the Office of the Surgeon General, along with NIMH and FDA, will sponsor a national conference on the treatment of children with behavioural and mental conditions.

As a private contribution to the initiative, the American Academy of Family Physicians is drawing up new clinical practice guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD in children. Lanny Copeland—chairman of the academy's Board of Directors—said that,

although there is concern that these drugs are being oversubscribed, there is also concern that some children who could benefit from these medications are not being treated. The difference such drugs can make to some children can be "like night and day", he said. "They do so much better."

Michael McCarthy

Active research focus

Herpes simplex virus type 2 shed by individuals with symptomless infection

Seropositivity for herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2) is associated with viral shedding in the genital tract, even in individuals with no reported history of genital herpes, report Anna Wald (University of Washington, WA, USA) and colleagues. "Our work", Wald says, "demonstrates that people who have HSV-2 infection, but don't give a history of genital herpes, shed the virus and can potentially infect their partners".

The researchers investigated genital shedding of HSV in 53 participants who were HSV-2 seropositive but had no reported history of genital herpes. The participants' patterns of viral shedding were compared with those of 90 individu-

als with symptomatic HSV-2 infection. Samples of genital secretions from both groups were taken daily and cultured for HSV. The virus was isolated from samples from 38 participants who reported no history of genital herpes, and HSV DNA was detected in samples from a further six symptomless individuals; the rate of subclinical shedding of HSV was similar in both groups.

33 symptomless individuals subsequently reported episodes of typical herpetic lesions. These people had shorter and less frequent episodes than the patients with symptomatic HSV-2 infection (median 3 days *vs* 5 days, median 3.0 per year *vs* 8.2 per year, respectively). Only one of the 53 partici-

pants did not have clinical or virological evidence of HSV infection (*N Engl J Med* 2000; **342**: 844–50).

Charles Prober and Ann Arvin (Stanford University School of Medicine, CA, USA) note that treatment of symptomatic individuals with antiviral therapy alone will not have a substantial impact on the prevalence of HSV-2 infections. "Genital herpes truly is a silent epidemic. Effective vaccines for herpes simplex are likely to be the only long-term solutions to this troublesome, persistent genital infection which can be life-threatening in newborns", conclude Prober and Arvin.

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