Varenicline (Champix) - Associated Manic Relapse in Bipolar Affective Disorder

Sir,

The drug varenicline (champix) is a nicotinic receptor partial agonist used as a pharmacological agent in smoking cessation. It has become the object of considerable media attention in North America due to reported links with increased suicidality and depression. Moore and Furberg analysed reports from the UK’s yellow card system and urged that doctors should monitor patients taking varenicline for abnormal behaviour, including aggressive and violent thoughts and acts, suicidal behaviour, hallucinations, and psychosis. McClure et al found that patients with a pre-existing history of depression were no more likely to report neuropsychiatric side effects than those without.

In our practice, we have encountered two serious manic relapses in patients with a history of bipolar affective disorder and who had been stable prior to the commencement of varenicline. Smoking cessation is a major aim of health promotion. Patients with psychiatric illness should not be exempt from these efforts. A number of pharmacological agents are promoted as having benefit as aids to stopping smoking. However, it is important that doctors, particularly in general practice, are fully aware of the potential side effects of these agents, particular in patients with a history of affective disorder, and these dangers go beyond suicidality and depression to include manic relapses.

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References
1. Moore TJ, Furberg CD. Risk of psychiatric side effects with varenicline. British Medical Journal, 2009; 339; b4964