

Letter to the Editor.
Position of the Polish Psychiatric Association
on the use of benzodiazepine derivatives
and drugs with a similar mechanism of action
in the treatment of mental disorders

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Benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action (e.g. non-benzodiazepine hypnotics) used short-term as sedatives, anti-anxiety or hypnotics are an important group of psychotropic drugs bringing rapid clinical improvement and reduction of suffering in many mental health disorders.

The primary indications for the use of benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action include: anxiety disorders, sleep disorders, depression with anxiety or agitation, catatonia and acute psychotic episodes, withdrawal syndromes, psychomotor agitation, acute suicide risk, and neurological diseases, e.g.

epilepsy, movement disorders, spasticity. These drugs are also used as premedication before surgery [1, 2]. For these indications, benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action are an effective treatment option and, if prescribed in the right way, do not lead to development of dependence.

On the other hand, an important, inescapable problem associated with the use of the above-mentioned drugs is their chronic use without medically verified indications, which often leads to addiction, generating multidimensional individual and social costs [3, 4].

In view of the above, the Polish Psychiatric Association is of the opinion that:

- the use of benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action in the aforementioned mental health indications should be limited to 4 weeks;
- it is necessary to adhere to the principles of safe use of benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action, e.g. the planned duration of drug administration should be established at the beginning of treatment. The risks associated with the administration of this class of drugs, especially the risk of dependence, should be discussed with the patient. The drug should be used for as short a time as possible, at the lowest possible dose, intermittent administration should be considered and it should be continually assessed whether early termination of drug treatment is possible [2];
- prolonged use of benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action in the above-mentioned indications is possible on a case-by-case basis, following a personal examination of the patient and documentation whether the benefits of continued use of the drug outweigh the risks of adverse effects (including increased risk of falls and accidents, adverse effects on psychomotor performance and cognitive function, respiratory function) and the development of dependence;
- it is advisable for medical scientific societies, in cooperation with the authorities of the self-government of physicians, state and local administration bodies and the National Centre for Prevention of Addictions, to undertake educational activities aimed at increasing the awareness of physicians of various specialties regarding the risk of dependence to benzodiazepine derivatives and drugs with a similar mechanism of action.

References

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