

GPs 'overuse chemical cosh' on children



ADHD drugs

Top five NHS clinical commissioning groups (CCG)	average number of prescriptions per patient	Bottom five	average number of prescriptions per patient
Swale	0.04	Airedale, Wharfedale and Craven	0.002
Wirral	0.03	Knowsley	0.002
Great Yarmouth and Waveney	0.02	Portsmouth	0.002
North Tyneside	0.02	Newark and Sherwood	0.001
Northumberland	0.02	Warrington	0.001

Antidepressants

Top five NHS CCG	Bottom five		
Blackpool	0.90	West Leicestershire	0.58
Sunderland	0.89	Newark and Sherwood	0.58
Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgefield	0.88	Coastal West Sussex	0.58
North Norfolk	0.85	Airedale, Wharfedale and Craven	0.58
West Norfolk	0.82	North East Lincolnshire	0.57

Source: Health and Social Care Information Centre prescription data, with analytics by Qlik Sense

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DOCTORS in parts of Kent and Wirral are 30 times more likely to prescribe drugs to control the behaviour of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) than those in other parts of the country, official NHS data reveals. Children and adults in Warrington, less than an hour's drive from Wirral, are the least likely to be prescribed drugs for ADHD, the most common behavioural disorder in the country.

The postcode lottery has been revealed by an analysis of more than 1bn NHS prescriptions in England in the year to April by the country's 200-plus clinical commissioning groups (CCGs).

CCGs tend to have between 200,000 and 300,000 patients, but disparities are far wider at the level of individual GP practices, alarming those concerned that doctors are resorting too readily to a "chemical cosh" to keep children with ADHD under control. While symptoms usually improve with age, many will continue to experience problems into adulthood.

Dr Tony Lloyd, chief executive of the ADHD Foundation, said: "I am grateful to see this data. It is telling us that there is an alarming level of inconsistency of approach ... and an inclination to over-prescribe."

"It's about pathologising and overmedicalising something that has been part of the human condition for mil-

lennia. Medication is not and should not be the first line of treatment except in the most severe cases."

However, Lloyd said doctors were not necessarily to blame because they were often not provided with alternatives by

their CCGs. He called for parents and teachers to be better educated about how to "self-regulate what is effectively a chronic medical condition".

NHS Swale CCG, which covers the Isle of Sheppey, Sittingbourne and Teynham in

Kent, spent £186,500 on four types of medication licensed for the treatment of ADHD, and dispensed the most prescriptions per patient. It did not respond to requests for a comment.

NHS Wirral CCG was a close

second, with Great Yarmouth and Waveney CCG in third.

Karen Rogan, a tutor at Liverpool Hope University, whose daughter Katie, 16, has been taking the drug Concerta for her ADHD since the age of nine, said: "In my daughter's case

she won the postcode lottery and it has been transformative, so it is alarming that there are these huge differences in prescribing."

Patients with depression also experience a postcode lottery, with those in Blackpool

more than four times more likely to be prescribed the most common drugs for depression, including Prozac and Seroxat, than those in the London boroughs of Brent and Ealing.

Figures for the six most

commonly prescribed antidepressants, known as selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which include Seroxat, Prozac and Lustral, reveal NHS Blackpool CCG handed out the equivalent of almost one prescription per patient in the past year. It did not respond to requests for a comment.

NHS Sunderland CCG had the second-highest level of antidepressant prescriptions per patient, with NHS Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgfield CCG in third place.

The prescription data was analysed by David Bolton, healthcare industry director at Qlik, an American-based business-intelligence company. He has loaded information from the Health and Social Care Information Centre about more than 1bn NHS prescriptions, worth more than £8bn, onto Qlik Sense, an analytics platform that can be used by the general public.

Bolton found that the average patient in London received 13.1 prescription items a year, compared with 21.4 in the north of England.

GPs wrote 19m prescriptions for 2.3bn paracetamol tablets at a total cost of £62m, the data also reveals. The average cost of prescriptions to the NHS was £140.99 per registered patient.

Bolton hopes patients will use the information to check on their own GPs. "The NHS can effectively crowdsource analytics, enabling anyone to shine a spotlight on anomalies," he said. "The potential to uncover waste is enormous."

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