

# Calls for caution on psychotropic drug use in residential aged care

26 February 2020



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Residential aged care providers should rethink use of psychotropic medicines according to researchers behind the latest work from the SAHMRI-based Registry of Senior Australians (ROSA).

Dr. Stephanie Harrison is the lead author of the study which was published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*. She says use of "chemical restraints" for people in [residential aged care](#) has been a key focus of the recent Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

"There has been growing concern about the use of psychotropic medicines, especially [antipsychotics](#), but it was previously unknown if people were already being prescribed these medicines before they moved to residential care," Dr. Harrison says.

"Our study showed that although the proportion of individuals receiving psychotropic medicines is generally high for older Australians before entering residential care, that proportion increased markedly after entering residential care."

The research team examined seven years of national data that included more than 320,000 Australians entering permanent residential aged care. The data reveal 21 percent of residents received [antipsychotic medication](#) within the first three months of their stay. Of these people, 46 percent had not been prescribed antipsychotics in the 12 months before entering care.

"Antipsychotic medicines are associated with a higher risk of serious adverse events and should only be used in accordance with guidelines, at the lowest possible dose and with appropriate monitoring," Dr. Harrison says.

The study also showed 31 percent of residents were given benzodiazepines and 38 percent received antidepressants during the first three months of their stay. Of these people, 39 percent and 20 percent respectively had not received those medicines in the year before going to residential care.

The report authors, including geriatrician and Flinders University academic, Professor Craig Whitehead, are calling on aged care providers to find alternatives to the use of psychotropic drugs.

"There are effective non-pharmacological approaches to help people experiencing changes in behaviour which are commonly experienced by people with dementia," Professor Whitehead says.

"If you have a loved one taking one of these medications, or you're unsure what medications they're taking, speaking with their GP or aged care facility nursing staff is a great first step. Regular review of medications is always a good idea and they should be able to suggest whether the [medication](#) is still needed."

Psychotropic medicines affect a person's behaviour or mood. The psychotropic medicines investigated in the study were antipsychotics, benzodiazepines

and antidepressants.

Antipsychotic medicines may help people with severe mental health conditions. In this study, the most common antipsychotic dispensed was risperidone (62 percent of residents who received antipsychotics). Risperidone is indicated for managing severe, persistent psychological symptoms in people with dementia.

The most common benzodiazepine in this study was temazepam (62 percent of residents who received benzodiazepines). Temazepam is often used to treat conditions such as sleep disturbance and anxiety.

**More information:** Stephanie L Harrison et al. The dispensing of psychotropic medicines to older people before and after they enter residential aged care, *Medical Journal of Australia* (2020). [DOI: 10.5694/mja2.50501](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.50501)

Provided by South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI)

APA citation: Calls for caution on psychotropic drug use in residential aged care (2020, February 26) retrieved 27 May 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-caution-psychotropic-drug-residential-aged.html>

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