Is St. John’s wort (SJW) an Evidenced Based Treatment-Alternative for Depressed Minors? - Facts and Prescribing Trends in Germany

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Abstract

The use of St. John’s wort (SJW) as an alternative antidepressant treatment for minors is controversial. The aim of this study was to investigate prescribing rates and relevant prescribing data on SJW in Germany.

Methods

A retrospective analysis was performed on all prescriptions written for SJW in January through March 1999 for 27% of all children aged 0 to 16 years in Baden-Württemberg by 6886 practitioners of general, internal and pediatric medicine at the expense of the Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse (a health-insurance). Prescriptions for SJW were categorized in terms of their licencing status for different age groups and Anatomical Therapeutical Chemical Classification groups.

Results

In the sample, 268 prescriptions of SJW and 96 prescriptions of compound preparations were found. Together these are over 50% (53.4%) of all prescriptions of antidepressant drugs in the age-group of 0-16 years. Overall 54.9% of the prescriptions of SJW and 26.0% of compound preparations were off-label. Data show that the use of SJW is not common in Germany than e.g. in the USA or in the Netherlands (Ro et al. in prep.). A high rate of use of SJW could explain this difference. If there is a relevant prescription-rate of SJW by physicians this would mean that in Germany an alternative psychopharmacological treatment of mood disorders in childhood and adolescence is common.

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CONCLUSIONS

1) These prescribing-data show the relevance of SJW in physician initiated drug therapy of mood disorders in childhood. More over half of the prescribed drugs were SJW. Overall 54.9% of the prescriptions of SJW and 26.0% of compound preparations were off-label.

2) The data suggest a small but relevant off-label use of SJW in minors. Compound products may have more side effects than pure extracts of SJW. They are prescribed even for very young children.

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