

SAND abstract No. 56 from the BEACH program 2003–04

Subject: Prevalence, cause and severity of adverse pharmacological events

Organisation supporting this study: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing

Issues: The proportion of general practice patients who have experienced an adverse event resulting from the use of a medication during the preceding six months. The number, main cause and severity of these adverse events was investigated.

Sample: 8,215 encounters from 282 GPs; data collection period: 06/05/2003–09/06/2003, 15/07/2003–18/08/2003 and 20/01/2004–23/02/2004.

Method: Detailed in the paper entitled 'SAND Method 2003–04' on this website:
<http://www.fmrc.org.au/publications/SAND_abstracts.htm>.

Summary of results

GPs reported that 852 patients (10.4%, 95% CI: 9.4–11.4) had experienced an adverse event in response to using a medication in the past six months. Older patients aged 45–64, 65–74 and 75+ were significantly more likely to have experienced an adverse medication event (12.4%, 15.4% and 15.3% respectively) than younger patients. Also, female patients (11.4%, 95% CI: 10.1–12.6) were significantly more likely than male patients (8.9%, 95% CI: 7.7–10.0) to have experienced a medication related adverse event in the previous 6 months.

Of those experiencing an adverse event the majority (83.5%) had experienced only one adverse event, with 10.7% and 5.8% experiencing two and three or more adverse events respectively. From a list of 9 reasons, 89.7% of patients specified only one reason for their most recent adverse event(s), with another 9.4% and 0.9% indicating two and three reasons respectively.

The most frequently specified reason for the most recent adverse event(s) was recognised side effect (65.7% of all reasons), followed by drug sensitivity (11.8%) and allergy (11.0%).

GP 'severity' ratings for the adverse event(s) were collected July/August 2003 and January/February 2004 only. Of the 580 patients indicating an adverse event from 5,500 encounters, severity rating was available for 551 patients. Over half of patients (53.9%; 95% CI: 48.3–59.5) were rated as having a 'mild' event(s), with another 35.8% (95% CI: 31.1–40.4) rated as 'moderate'. A 'severe' rating was given to 55 patients (10.0%; 95% CI: 6.9–13.1).

For 76 of 327 patients (23.2%, 95% CI: 17.4–29.1) GPs classified the adverse event as preventable. Adverse events were listed as preventable for 19.9% of 'mild' events, 25% of 'moderate' events and 32% of 'severe' events. The severity specific rates were not significantly different due to small numbers and wide confidence intervals.

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