

Delirium E-Resource Dr Heather Barry Discusses Medications and Delirium

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So polypharmacy can be defined as the use of multiple medications at the same time. So as our population is ageing, people are living longer with multiple long term conditions for which a number of different medications may be prescribed and that is why polypharmacy can be really prevalent in the older patient.

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Traditionally we thought of polypharmacy in terms of numerical cut offs. So we would have quite often defined Poly Pharmacies the use of five or more medications than a person. But we've moved away from that in recent years really in recognition of the fact that

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multiple medications may be prescribed to manage lots of different medical conditions. So we now tend to think of polypharmacy as either appropriate, just as I have mentioned, or inappropriate. And the use of potentially inappropriate medications then is where the risk of those medications far outweigh the benefits. So we would tend to think about medications like benzodiazepines and older people and also some anticholinergic medications such as tricyclic

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antidepressants or first generation antihistamines. And those types of medications then can be potentially reversible causes of delirium in older people. And obviously if people are also receiving polypharmacy and there are lots of different medications, then that further increases the risk of delirium.

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So that really emphasises, I guess the importance of comprehensive medication review in older patients to assess if medications could be a potentially reversible cause of delirium. So has a medication been added recently that could be the cause of a factor or has a dose increased recently and and could that be at play

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Converse to that then medications may also be used to manage delirium in the older patients. So delirium may manifest as a sign of untreated infection, for example a urinary tract infection. And when the patient then would be initiated on an appropriate antibiotic therapy to manage that infection, then in turn that should help to manage the delirium. Equally, if they were experiencing untreated pain

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and once an appropriate analgesic would be started, then the the delirium that may have been manifesting as a sign of that should also cease to exist.