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Using Medications to Detect Treated Maternal Depression

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Background: Depression affects maternal health-related quality of life, including marital relationships, mother/child bonding, and infant behavior and development. Identifying and treating this health problem is imperative. Studies using administrative data have defined depression as any dispensing of antidepressants. Our aim was to evaluate whether anti-depressants are prescribed for medical conditions other than depression among women before, during, and after pregnancy, and to ascertain under what conditions antidepressants can be used as indicators of maternal depression.

Methods: We identified pregnancy episodes among women who were health plan members between January 1, 1998 and December 31, 2001, and were aged 12 to 55 years during that time. To be included, pregnancies had to occur within a continuous eligibility period. We identified women who had at least one dispensing of an antidepressant medication, but no depression-indicating diagnoses, during the 39 weeks before the start of pregnancy, during the pregnancy, or during the 39 weeks after pregnancy. Medical records were reviewed for a subsample of these women to detect medical indications for antidepressants other than depression.

Results: Among 4,398 eligible pregnancies, 200 (4.6%) were associated with antidepressant use but no depression-indicating diagnosis. Among a subsample of 30 women who were dispensed tricyclic antidepressants, 67% had diagnoses for chronic pain or migraine headache, and 23% had a diagnosis for another mental health disorder, such as anxiety or premenstrual dysphoria syndrome. Among 10 women prescribed bupropion and had no diagnosis indicating tobacco use, 30% had a diagnosis for another type of mental health disorder, and 30% for a headache or chronic pain. Among five women who were prescribed bupropion and had a diagnosis indicating tobacco use, we found no evidence that the medication was prescribed for depression. Diagnostic frequencies for other mental health disorders, chronic pain, migraine headaches, and tobacco use are presented by type of antidepressant medication.

Conclusions: Chronic pain, migraine headache, tobacco use, and mental health conditions other than depression are indications for antidepressant medications before, during, and after pregnancy. Using antidepressants alone as an indicator of depression may lead to biased results in epidemiologic studies ascertaining maternal depression.