Caught in the eye of the storm: a qualitative study of views and experiences of planned drug holidays from methylphenidate in child and adolescent ADHD treatment

Kinda Ibrahim, Carsten Vogt and Parastou Donyai

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH (February 2016)
DOI: 10.1111/camh.12156

Background
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can be treated with stimulant medication such as methylphenidate. Although effective, methylphenidate can cause serious side-effects, including suppressed appetite, growth retardation and sleep problems. A drug holiday is a deliberate interruption of pharmacotherapy for a defined period of time and for a specific clinical purpose, for example for appeasing side-effects. While some international guidelines recommend introducing drug holidays in ADHD treatment, this is not practised routinely. Our aim was to examine the views and experiences of planned drug holidays from methylphenidate with adults who have responsibility for treatment decisions in children and adolescents with ADHD.

Method
In-depth interviews were carried out. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services practitioners (n = 8), General practitioners (n = 8), teachers (n = 5) and mothers of children with ADHD (n = 4) were interviewed in a UK setting. Interview transcripts were analysed using grounded theory.

Results
Methylphenidate eases the experience of the child amid problems at home and at school and once started is mostly continued long term. Some families do practise short-term drug holidays at weekends and longer term ones during school holidays. The decision to introduce drug holidays is influenced by the child's academic progress, the parents' ability to cope with the child, as well as medication beliefs. Trialling a drug holiday is thought to allow older children to self-assess their ability to manage without medication when they show signs of wanting to discontinue treatment prematurely.

Conclusions
Planned drug holidays could address premature treatment cessation by enabling adolescents to assess repercussions under medical supervision.