In brief

Government employees wearing protective suits put on boots to cull chickens in the Japanese town of Taragi in Kumamoto prefecture on 14 April. Two chickens have tested positive for avian influenza at a farm where more than 1000 chickens have died, marking the country’s first case of bird flu in 3 years, the Agricultural Ministry said.

From NPS MedicineWise

Senate Committee recommendations for antipsychotic use in people with dementia

The recently released Senate Community Affairs References Committee report on the care of Australians living with dementia (http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Dementia/Report/Report) is a positive step towards more judicious use of antipsychotic medicines in people with behavioural or psychological problems associated with dementia.

The report gives 18 key recommendations, including 3-month review by the prescribing doctor to assess the ongoing need for antipsychotic medicines initiated in residents of aged care facilities. Another recommendation would see health professionals undertaking longer consultations with a patient and at least one family member or carer when the patient has presented with dementia. Residential aged care facilities would also be required to report circumstances in which an individual has been prescribed antipsychotic medication for more than 6 months.

While there is sometimes a need for the use of psychotropic medicines, such as antipsychotics, in residents with dementia, Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme data suggest they are used inappropriately, at doses higher than recommended or in potentially dangerous combinations with other medicines. Utilisation data also suggest extensive off-label use of antipsychotics for patients with dementia in these care settings (http://www.pbs.gov.au/industry/listing/elements/dusc-meetings/dos/dusc-dos-jun-2013.pdf).

NPS MedicineWise recently collaborated with Webstercare to design a new Quality Use of Medicine (QUM) report within its medication management software that helps residential aged care facilities understand and analyse their antipsychotic medicine usage (http://agedcare.nps.org.au). The QUM report flags patients who have been taking antipsychotics for longer than 3 or 6 months, and provides patterns of antipsychotic usage in the residential aged care facility over time. This enables pharmacists to provide information to staff and prescribers working in residential aged care facilities to help them understand, analyse and effectively manage the use of antipsychotic medicines for residents.

Antipsychotics should be used with caution and only when the benefits outweigh the risk of harm. Their use, alongside ongoing non-pharmacological management, also requires careful monitoring, given the serious consequences of getting it wrong.

Lynn M Weekes
Chief Executive Officer
NPS MedicineWise

doi: 10.5694/mja14.00561
Impact of antibiotics on growth in undernourished children

Antibiotics have a growth-promoting effect in young children in low- and middle-income countries, a systematic review and meta-analysis published in the BMJ reports. Ten studies, with data from 4316 children aged 1 month to 12 years, showed an association between antibiotic use and increased mean height or linear growth of 0.04 cm per month, and an extra 23.5 g weight gain per month. The authors speculated that the growth-promoting effect of antibiotics might operate through reduction in subclinical infections and beneficial effects on intestinal microbiota. An editorial in the same issue said that the use of antibiotics for promoting growth “poses problems”. “Any large scale use of antibiotics must be weighed against the possibility of serious long-term harm both to individuals and to global populations through the emergence of resistance”, the editorialist wrote, adding that high-risk children, such as those with defined infections, HIV or severe acute malnutrition, would benefit the most.


Diabetes complication incidence declines as care improves

Rates of five key diabetes-related complications declined in the US in the past two decades even though the absolute number of cases of complications continues to increase, according to research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Using data from the National Health Interview Study, National Hospital Discharge Survey, the US Renal Data System and the US National Vital Statistics System, the authors compared the incidences of lower-extremity amputations, end-stage renal disease, acute myocardial infarction (MI), stroke and death from hyperglycaemic crisis between 1990 and 2010. The largest relative decline was seen in acute MI (–67.8%) and death from hyperglycaemic crisis (–64.4%), followed by stroke and amputations (–52.7% and –51.4%, respectively), and the smallest decline in end-stage renal disease (–28.3%). The authors said the results probably reflected “a combination of advances in acute clinical care, improvements in the health care system, and health promotions directed at patients with diabetes”.


Prescribing pharmacists improve stroke risk factor control

A nurse-led case management program improved control of key stroke risk factors (hypertension and dyslipidaemia) in patients after minor strokes, but even greater improvements were seen in a prescribing pharmacist-led intervention, according to research published in the CMAJ. None of the 279 participants met guideline targets (systolic blood pressure ≤140 mmHg, fasting low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol ≤2.0 mmol/L) at baseline. Participants in both groups received monthly visits for 6 months from either a nurse or a pharmacist. Nurses measured cardiovascular risk factors, counselled patients and faxed results to primary care physicians (active control). Pharmacists did all of the above as well as prescribed according to treatment guidelines (intervention). After 6 months, 43.4% of participants in the pharmacist group met both systolic blood pressure and LDL guideline targets compared with 30.9% in the nurse-led group, an absolute difference of 12.5%.


MJA InSight poll

Should doctors actively lobby governments about the potential impacts of climate change on public health?

66% Yes — it’s vital

22% No — not our role

12% Maybe — doctors need more education

Take part in next week’s poll on: www.mja.com.au/insight

Cate Swannell
doi: 10.5694/mja14.n0505