

ABC Radio Australia

Concern over anti-psychotic drug given to soldiers

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Michael Vincent

Special forces soldiers reveal how military doctors dish out anti-psychotic drugs as sleeping pills.

Psychiatrists in Australia and the United States are calling for a review of the use of anti-psychotic medications to treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

Australia's Department of Defence has confirmed an almost 600 per cent increase in the use of one particular anti-psychotic, Seroquel, in just five years.

Soldiers have told Lateline the drug, originally intended to treat bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, is being prescribed just to help them sleep.

Lateline spoke to special forces soldiers from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. All have PTSD, and some have received psychological counselling, but others have not.

All say military doctors or GPs sanctioned by the Defence Department prescribed them Seroquel as a sedative.

One soldier, who Lateline has called Trooper M to protect his identity, has been a user of the drug for the past year.

He is only 23 and served as a special forces soldier on one tour of Afghanistan that left him with anxiety and nightmares.

Trooper M sought help when the nightmares became too much.

"So the mental health nurse liaised with one of the medical officers and from that... before I saw a psychiatrist or anything like that, they decided that Seroquel would be the choice of medication."

He says he does not know why, and just followed what he was being told.

One night, he accidentally took 400mg.

"I didn't wake up for over 24 hours. It was a bit of a wake-up call," he said.

Suzie-Q

Professor Stan Catts, a psychiatrist at the Brain and Mind Institute in Sydney and the University of Queensland, has studied Vietnam veterans with PTSD and their families for more than a decade.

"If a veteran is getting sedation with Seroquel, it's not indicative of its therapeutic effect, it's indicative of its adverse effect," he said.

"That adverse effect should not be used as a way of treating a sleep disorder. You should treat the PTSD or depression that's the true cause of the sleep disorder.

"I think the Seroquel issue is worrying because it is an indicator, probably, (of) poor quality treatment.

"It is an indicator that treatment that can be administered through a minute of a prescription is replacing intensive psychological treatments that require highly trained staff and require a lot more time to administer."

Seroquel, also known by its generic name Quetiapine, was originally created to treat only bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

In 2010 it was approved for use in Australia by the Therapeutic Goods Administration to treat generalised anxiety disorder and depression.

The TGA's recommended dose for this was up to 150mg per day, but Defence's medical formulary offers soldiers up to 400mg tablets.

Lateline has been told that some soldiers are on up to 700mg.

"If you are just simply trying to induce a degree of calm to sleep better, 50-100mg ought to be enough," Professor Catts said.

"However if you're actually treating treatment resistant depression or arousal which is part of the PTSD symptoms, then you're probably going to need a harder dose... If psychosis is under consideration, you need much higher doses, 500-700mg."

'Like a hangover'

Richard A Friedman, a psychiatrist at Weill Cornell Medical College in the United States, concurs.

"Seven hundred milligrams is a whooping dose of Seroquel to give to a drug-naive person," Professor Friedman said.

"My guess is 700mg is given to people who have already experienced several hundred milligrams without an effect.



Seroquel was originally created to treat only bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. (Credit: ABC)

Seroquel: Key facts

- It is nicknamed Suzie-Q and is also known by its generic name Quetiapine
- It was originally created to treat bipolar disorder and schizophrenia
- In 2010 it was approved for use in Australia by the Therapeutic Goods Administration
- The TGA recommended doses of up to 150mg daily
- Defence offers soldiers up to 400mg tablets, but it is understood some are on up to 700mg
- Defence confirmed a 573 per cent increase in scripts for the medication in five years

“ I think the Seroquel issue is worrying because it is an indicator, probably, (of) poor quality treatment ”

Professor Stan Catts

"That's a very, very large dose. That's clearly an antipsychotic-sized dose of the drug."

That raises the question, how many still serving soldiers have psychosis, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia to justify those doses?

Or are those who are using it for sedation simply needing higher doses?

Corporal J, whose name has also been changed to protect his identity, told Lateline that Seroquel's effect was like "a hangover".

"During the day when I was awake I would find myself staring at a wall and drooling," he said.

"People would ask if I was OK - these would be senior officers.

"I'd be doing that for three to four hours while at work - I couldn't react. I was a blob occupying the body of a soldier."

Now 40, he has been a special forces soldier for two decades including multiple tours of Afghanistan and Iraq.

"I was on these drugs for six months when I was diagnosed with PTSD," he said.

"That was what an army psychiatrist informed me was the minimum treatment time...under the guidelines," he said.

'Steadily increasing'

The Australian Defence Force's most recent figures show that 8 per cent, or almost 2,500 of its serving personnel, suffer from PTSD.

In a statement to Lateline, Defence said soldiers are to be offered psychological therapy as a "first line treatment".

But it says for patients where these treatments are less effective or those who exhibit high levels of "irritability, aggression or depression" medications like Seroquel can be used with careful monitoring.

Defence also said that Seroquel is "effective" for insomnia and preferable to potentially "addictive" sleep drugs.

But it concedes that its usage of Seroquel has been "steadily increasing".

That is an understatement; in five years the number of "packages" prescribed has increased 573 per cent.

Lateline specifically asked how many soldiers have been offered or have taken part in psychotherapy clinics, but Defence did not provide an answer.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, which deals with soldiers who have left the service, did.

It says just 155 veterans completed a "PTSD group treatment program" in the past financial year.

DVA also said it paid for almost 19,000 scripts for Seroquel's generic Quetiapine and that covered 3,000 veterans or their relatives.

It also said it paid for thousands of phone counselling services.

Psychoactive drug canteen

The increased usage of antipsychotics is not just a concern in Australia.

Professor Friedman recently described the American military as operating a "psychoactive drug canteen".

"What I discovered was that the military is using antipsychotic drugs in our soldiers at rates that far exceed comparable rates in the civilian population," he said.

"In other words from 2005 to 2011 the rate of use of antipsychotic drugs rose 1,100 per cent."

"(They were) obviously using enormous amounts of antipsychotic drugs off-label, for purposes that they're really not intended, or for indications that are way outside their usual use and way outside what most psychiatrists and non-psychiatric physicians would ever use these drugs for."

That came to a stop a year ago when the US Army's medical command issued new orders.

So alarmed was its chief of staff, Herbert A Coley, that he declared in a memo to all army doctors that there were numerous concerns with "potential long-term adverse health effects" from drugs like Seroquel or Quetiapine.

He took the drugs off the military's official inventory and told care providers they would have to get authorisation to prescribe it in future.

"It was a recognition on their part that these drugs were being overused or inappropriately used," Professor Friedman said.

"And what they were essentially concerned about, although they might not have said it, is the rates of suicide, post traumatic stress disorder and depression are quite high in the military, and antipsychotic drugs are ineffective in treating - largely ineffective in treating PTSD - post traumatic stress disorder - and depression."

"So in essence they were aware these drugs are among the most popularly used but perhaps the least effective for some of the problems that most affect soldiers."

New research

A meta-analysis of antipsychotics like Seroquel used to treat major depressive disorder was published in the peer-reviewed journal Public Library of Science Medicine.

The researchers from across the US including Harvard Medical School, warned clinicians that the efficacy of the drugs to treat "observer-rated depressive symptoms" should be treated "cautiously" in light of the "abundant evidence of potential treatment related harm".

Seroquel had "several adverse events" including "sedation", "functional impairment", "abnormal metabolic laboratory results" and "weight gain".

Corporal J said he put on 20 kilograms.

"I went from 85 kilos to a rather sloppy 105," he said.

"I was an elite specimen, then I couldn't do anything. It's not good for your state of mind."

Professor Catts said it is a serious concern.

“ During the day when I was awake I would find myself staring at a wall and drooling. People would ask if I was OK - these would be senior officers. ”

Corporal J

“ (The soldiers) put their lives on the line for us in a war and the least they should expect is the best quality treatment. ”

"If things like weight gain are not managed from the outset there are long-term risks that could in fact cause premature death, through something called the metabolic syndrome leading to cardiovascular disease," he said. **Professor Stan Catts**

"(Defence) need to review the quality of treatment these men are receiving.

"(The soldiers) put their lives on the line for us in a war and the least they should expect is the best quality treatment."

Trooper M has now left the Army.