Monitoring polypharmacy in healthcare systems through a multi-setting survey: should we put more attention on long term care facilities?

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Significance for public health

We believe that our research is appropriate for your journal because concerns a very important issue for healthcare systems: the management of drugs in elderly people, in particular our study evaluated the topic of polypharmacy and potentially inappropriate prescriptions in a whole regional healthcare system, considering the three main care settings: acute hospitals, long term care facilities and general practitioners’ clinics. We also analysed the problem included all the medications that patients assumed, not only ones that were reimbursed by healthcare system. Considering these premises this study permitted to have a wide point of view for setting tailored policies and it underlines the importance of creating a system that starts from real data and in this way will allows to compare and measure improvement actions.

Abstract

Background. Polypharmacy is a main issue of patient safety in all healthcare settings (i.e. increase adverse drug reactions and incidence of drug-drug interactions, etc.). The main object of the study was to evaluate the prevalence of polypharmacy and the appropriateness of drugs prescriptions in the regional health system (RHS) of Friuli Venezia-Giulia Region, Italy.

Design and methods. We carried out a point prevalence study in May 2014; 1582 patients ≥65 years were included from: 14 acute hospitals, 46 Long Term Care Facilities (LTCFs) and 42 general practitioners’ (GPs) clinics. Data analysis included the evaluation of potentially inappropriate prescriptions (PIPs) taking Beers criteria as a reference.

Results. Patients in therapy with 10 drugs or more were 13.5%: 15.2% in hospitals, 9.7% in GPs’ clinics and 15.6% in LTCFs. According to Beers criteria we identified 1152 PIPs that involved globally almost half of patients (46.0%): 41.9% in hospitals, 59.6% in LTCFs and 37.0% in GPs’ clinics. The 53.9% of patients received at least one mainly kidney excreted drug; for these patients the evaluation of serum creatinine was overall present in the 87.7% (747/852): 96.4% in hospital ones, 87.5% in LTCFs and 70.8% in GPs’ clinics. The prevalence of polypharmacy in Europe ranges from to 33.8% to 73.3% depending on definition reported;9 official data regarding the prevalence of polypharmacy in Italian elderly (approximately 12 million of people ≥65 years old) report that 6 million people were treated with 5-9 drugs and 1.3 million with 10 drugs or more.9 These data potentially underestimate the phenomenon because they did not include medications not reimbursed by the national pharmaceutical formulary, such as benzodiazepines and some of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

Possible consequences of polypharmacy include: increase of adverse drug reactions (ADR), incidence of drug-drug interactions, decrease in patient compliance to treatment, increase of risk of falling, inability and cost increase for healthcare system,10-13 due to an higher rate of hospitalisation, morbidity and mortality.

Although general data are available on polypharmacy, only few ones are available about its presence in the main healthcare settings: primary care, LTCFs and hospitals. A detailed picture at healthcare system level is, in fact, a first step for facing polypharmacy. This paper reports the results of a multi-setting survey on polypharmacy conducted in a regional healthcare system with the aim to identify strengths and weaknesses of the different settings as premise for the definition of tailored actions.

Introduction

Polypharmacy represents a main patient safety issue in all healthcare settings worldwide.1 Although it can potentially concern people of any ages, the elderly are most frequently involved: the availability of a greater number of drugs, the increase of life expectancy and a higher prevalence of chronic diseases represent the main reasons for a higher incidence in this population.2

Many definitions of polypharmacy, both qualitative and quantitative, are currently used: medication does not match the diagnosis, excessive use of medication, duplication of medication, medication prescribed to treat the side effect of another medication,3 but the simultaneous intake of many medications (generally five or more) is the one more frequently adopted.4

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Design and Methods

The study was carried out in the regional healthcare system (RHS) of Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG), Italy, in March 2014 and explored the three main settings that provide care to elderly: a) all the fourteen public and private acute hospitals of the RHS, b) 46 (out of 90) long term care facilities (LTCFs) (22 nursing homes and 24 long term chronic care facilities) and c) 42 volunteer general practitioners (GPs) representing all the 22 local health districts of RHS.

Eligible people were all the 63 years old or more who, at the moment of the survey, were taking at least one chronic or acute drug. Oncologic drugs and topical medications (i.e. eye-drops and ointments) were excluded as well as homeopathic and natural ones.

The sample was recruited applying a specific approach in each setting: a) for hospitals all the eligible patients discharged from internal
The survey involved overall 1582 patients; their characteristics, stratified by setting, are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Studied population characteristics by explored setting.

|                    | Hospitals (n. 528) | GP s (n. 527) | LTCFs (n. 527) | Overall (n. 1582) |
|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|
| Females            | 261 (49.3)        | 302 (57.3)   | 371 (70.4)     | 934 (59.0)       |
| Age classes        |                   |              |                |                  |
| 65-74              | 128 (24.2)        | 233 (44.2)   | 69 (13.1)      | 430 (27.2)       |
| 75-84              | 205 (38.8)        | 203 (38.5)   | 183 (34.7)     | 591 (37.4)       |
| ≥85                | 195 (36.9)        | 91 (17.3)    | 275 (52.2)     | 561 (35.5)       |
| N. of prescribed drugs |                |              |                |                  |
| 1-4                | 139 (26.3)        | 223 (42.3)   | 157 (29.8)     | 519 (32.8)       |
| 5-9                | 309 (58.5)        | 253 (48.0)   | 288 (54.6)     | 850 (53.3)       |
| ≥10                | 80 (15.2)         | 51 (9.7)     | 82 (15.6)      | 213 (13.5)       |
| Number of diseases |                   |              |                |                  |
| 0-1                | 80 (15.2)         | 51 (9.7)     | 83 (15.7)      | 214 (13.5)       |
| 2-4                | 317 (60.0)        | 300 (56.9)   | 342 (64.9)     | 959 (60.6)       |
| ≥5                 | 131 (24.8)        | 176 (33.4)   | 102 (19.4)     | 409 (25.9)       |
PIP increases with the number of assumed drugs (OR 2.77 and 5.60 respectively for 5-9 class and ≥10 class compare to 1-4); also the setting has an important influence, in fact hospital and GPs’ patients have a significantly lower risk (OR 0.46 for both) compared to elderly people in LTCFs.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study was carried out to obtain an overall picture of medications use in elderly people for the different RHS settings; sample heterogeneity was a necessary requisite to understand the problem in all its complexity; the three involved settings represent the main care providers for elderly in the RHS so a specific knowledge of their situation was considered an essential prerequisite for the definition and implementation of actions and setting policies.

In this perspective, the prevalence survey was the methodology for reaching our goal; it allowed us both to recruit many patients in a limited time and to collect all the prescribed drugs (included RHS not reimbursed and PRN ones), two requisites necessary for a thorough picture as close as possible to reality. Furthermore this approach was able to overcome the existing differences in the way clinical data are reported, collected and stored in the 3 different settings and within LTCFs.

Table 2. The five most common prescribed drug classes stratified by setting.

| Drug class                              | Hospitals (n. 3386) | General practitioners (n. 2872) | LTCFs (n. 3341) |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| B01 Antithrombotic agents               | 481                | 374                            | 425             |
| A02 Drugs for acid related disorders    | 379                | 330                            | 380             |
| C03 Diuretics                           | 315                | 222                            | 284             |
| C09 Agents acting on the renin-angiotensin system | 267                | 214                            | 251             |
| C07 Beta blocking agents                | 243                | 191                            | 211             |

Table 3. Logistic regression model and univariate analysis of the presence of at least one potentially inappropriate medication (PIP) for Beers criteria.

| Presence of at least one PIP | Univariate analysis | Logistic regression |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Patients exposed            | Sig. | OR   | 95% CI  | Sig. | OR   | 95% CI  |
| Gender                       |       |      |         |      |      |         |
| Female                       | 0.02  | 1.26 | 1.03-1.55 | 0.08 | 1.22 | 0.97-1.53 |
| Male                         | 0.72  |      |         |      |      |         |
| Age class                    |       |      |         |      |      |         |
| 75-84                        | 0.00  | 1.52 | 1.18-1.95 | 0.26 | 1.19 | 0.90-1.56 |
| 65-74                        | 0.00  | 1.64 | 1.27-2.12 | 0.47 | 1.12 | 0.83-1.50 |
| Setting                      |       |      |         |      |      |         |
| Hospitals                    | 0.00  | 0.48 | 0.38-0.62 | 0.00 | 0.46 | 0.35-0.60 |
| LTCFs                        | 0.00  | 0.40 | 0.31-0.51 | 0.00 | 0.46 | 0.35-0.60 |
| Diseases                     |       |      |         |      |      |         |
| 2-4                          | 0.04  | 1.56 | 1.15-2.12 | 0.16 | 1.26 | 0.91-1.76 |
| 0-1                          | 0.01  | 1.75 | 1.25-2.46 | 0.33 | 1.21 | 0.83-1.76 |
| Prescribed drugs             |       |      |         |      |      |         |
| ≥10                          | 0.00  | 2.81 | 2.22-3.55 | 0.00 | 2.77 | 2.16-3.54 |
| 1-4                          | 0.00  | 5.73 | 4.05-8.11 | 0.00 | 5.60 | 3.87-8.12 |

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each setting. The sample recruitment was set with different methodologies in the three settings adopting a tailored strategy for the different characteristics of patients’ stay: acute ones, residents and outpatients.

The overall prevalence of polypharmacy (67.2%) was quite similar to the results (61.0%) of the national prevalence study conducted by Geriatric Working Group of Italian Agency of Drugs (AIFA) in 2011;15 the gap between the two scenarios could be explained by the absence of the not reimbursed drugs by national pharmaceutical formulary in the AIFA one. Reliability of our data can also be confirmed by the increase in number of chronic diseases correlated to the number of prescribed drugs, as highlighted in literature.16,17

Taking Beers criteria as reference,14 the survey revealed that approximately half of patients (46.0%) had at least one PIP in their therapy, substantially similar to the results of other available experiences which analysed only single settings.18,19 In our case, the analysis by setting allowed a comparison and LTCFs emerged as most critical: almost 6 patients out of 10 presented a PIP. This result was significantly higher (P<0.05) compared to the other settings, also considering that the majority of LTCFs residents were followed by their own GPs and that in LTCFs the prevalence of 5 or more diseases was lower compared to GPs’ outpatients.

Furthermore through this approach we found that one of the main causes of PIPs occurrence was the significant (P<0.05) higher use of psycholeptic drugs in LTCFs compared to the other two settings.

Also data regarding the evaluation of renal function for patients who were taking at least one drug with renal excretion confirmed that LTCFs had a lower level of compliance compared to the other two settings; this is an important issue for patient safety because the knowledge of renal function is necessary to adapt drugs doses and to prevent accumulation complications.

The study identified a problem that must be necessarily considered primary for patient safety in a context of regional risk management approach, the stewardship of long term care providers for elderly also considering the emerging change in population demography.

A strength of the proposed approach is the ability to provide a full view of the state of the art about drugs prescription quality in a RHS; it could potentially be a starting point for policies aimed to improve patient safety and safer drug use: based on these results it is possible to communicate the state of the art to all interested stakeholders and to set tailored improvement programmes. Although there are many papers describing polypharmacy in elderly population almost all of them explored only one care setting and did not included systematically all prescribed drugs.

Regional plans should consider educational programmes for prescribers, continuous data flow on drugs use to all healthcare practitioners, sharing of good practices about drugs management (i.e. the periodic re-evaluation of patient’s therapy; the careful check of possible drug-drug interaction and of potentially inappropriate medications, etc.) and patient literacy on drugs use;20,21 further medication reconciliation should be systematically applied in all the healthcare settings and with particular attention in LTCFs, as they showed the greatest polypharmacy concern.

The routinely evaluation of renal function in elderly patients taking mainly kidney excreted drugs is one of the most important, and possibly less expensive, improvement initiatives suggested by our findings and it will be a priority for ensuring the right dose of drugs in this way preventing accumulation.

These data as well as their periodical repetition could be very helpful both in making clear different aspects of the problem locally and monitoring possible progresses.

The proposed approach had also some limitations and particularly, first one was that GPs’ recruitment for outpatients was only possible on voluntary basis and it consequently could have selected the more motivated ones; another one was that GPs’ outpatients, in spite of presence of higher prevalence of diseases, were usually more independent for own care management compared to LTCFs ones. Furthermore the adoption of only the Beers criteria could have underestimated PIPs rate if compared with studies that utilised also Screening Tool of Older Persons’ Potentially inappropriate Prescriptions (STOPP),22,23 but for our aim it was more important adopting an unique standardised tool that allows us to compare the three settings.

In conclusion, the availability of reliable estimation of the phenomenon in all the main healthcare settings of RHS is a necessary pre-requisite for setting up effective policies aimed to control polypharmacy. In our context LTCFs seemed to need special attention compared to hospitals and GPs’ clinics. The definition of policies and programmes at health system level needs a periodical monitoring of polypharmacy in the main settings of the system (primary care, LTCFs and hospitals) and setting tailored interventions for improving and promoting medication reconciliation process and drug management.

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