

Antidepressants tied to lower suicide rates in kids

By Karla Gale Fri Nov 3, 8:22 AM ET

In the 10 percent of US counties with the highest rates of prescriptions for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), a type of antidepressant, the rate of suicide among children ages 5 to 14 is lower than that observed in counties with lower rates, according to a new report.

"In the past, three large population studies in adults and adolescents found less suicide with increased use of Anti-depressant Medication," lead author Dr. Robert D. Gibbons told Reuters Health. "But there have been no such studies of younger children, until now."

In 2004, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panel began requiring a black box warning on SSRI prescriptions, based on reports that fluoxetine (Prozac) increased suicidal thoughts in children and adolescents.

"Now we are evaluating whether suicide rates have increased since the black box warning was required," Gibbons told Reuters Health, "and to see if decreased use of SSRIs is associated with actual suicide."

"If we see that decreased prescribing of SSRIs brought about by the black box warning is leading to an increased completed suicide rate in kids, then we want to get that message out as quickly as possible."

Among nearly 39 million children ages 5 to 14, there were 933 suicides between 1996 and 1998 (0.8 per 100,000 children per year).

Since the implementation of the black box warning, the rate of use for antidepressant prescriptions in children fell by about 30 percent. Subsequently, the overall observed suicide rate rose to as high as 1.7 per 100,000 for counties with the lowest use of Anti-depressant prescriptions. For the 10 percent of counties with the highest use of medicine, the rate was only 0.7 per 100,000, less than half as much.

"Our findings indicate that the previous results, restricting use of medication, were wrong," said Gibbons who was one of the members of the 2004 FDA advisory panel that voted 15 to 8 in favor of a black box warning on SSRI prescriptions. He noted that his group's findings have been replicated in data from the Netherlands, "and when we looked at insurance claims databases, we found no association between prescriptions of SSRI and suicide attempts in children."

SOURCE: American Journal of Psychiatry November 2006.