

Autism Research Review

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

A quarterly publication of the Autism Research Institute

Reviewing biomedical and educational research in the field of autism and related disorders

New study: fluvoxamine reduces autistic symptoms

A double-blind, placebo-controlled study by Christopher McDougle et al. indicates that the drug fluvoxamine (commonly known by the brand name Luvox) can significantly improve the language, behavior, and sociability of autistic adults.

McDougle and colleagues randomly assigned 30 autistic adults to a placebo group or a group receiving up to 300 mg. per day of fluvoxamine. Eight of the 15 patients receiving fluvoxamine improved by the end of the 12-week study, while none in the control group did. The researchers report that aggression, impulsivity, and repetitive behaviors declined significantly in the treated subjects, and that marked improvements were seen in social skills and language. "The drug didn't make mute patients verbal," McDougle noted, "but did reduce repetitive vocalizations that get in the way of verbalization."

taking fluvoxamine," and that the drug should not be used in conjunction with monoamine oxidase inhibitors.

McDougle and colleagues note that their study used only adult subjects, and that children may react differently to fluvoxamine. "The serotonin system," they caution, "is very different in children and adults." Indeed, according to *Clinical Psychiatry News*, "Early findings with children suggest that exacerbation of symptoms such as anxiety and agitation is

more likely in younger autistic patients who receive SSRIs." A controlled study testing fluvoxamine on autistic children is currently underway, and ARRI will keep readers informed as to the results.

"Fluvoxamine improves adult autism's core effects," Carl Sherman, *Clinical Psychiatry News*, August 1995, p. 13.

—and—

"Fluvoxamine for obsessive-compulsive disorder," *Medical Letter on Drugs and Therapeutics*, Vol. 37, No. 942, February 17, 1995, pp. 13-14.

Education groups charge that IDEA endangers regular ed teachers, students

America's two major teachers' organizations are calling for revisions in the 1975 Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA), which is currently up for re-evaluation. Their complaint: that it endangers teachers by placing violent special education students on regular campuses with inadequate provisions for dealing with their behavior problems.

According to a recent article in *Insight on the News*, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are disturbed by an escalating number of injuries to teachers caused by aggressive children with autism or other disabilities. "Violent and disruptive behavior by disabled students has ranged from defecating in the classroom to the regular battering of teachers and even the murder of other students," *Insight* writer Stephen Goode reports. But Goode notes that under the IDEA, only mild consequences—for instance, brief suspensions—are generally allowed when disabled students commit violent or antisocial acts. A North Carolina student who broke her teacher's arm, for instance, was suspended for two days, while an Oklahoma girl who stabbed her teacher with a nail was suspended for three days.

"Under an IDEA 'stay-put provision,'" Goode notes, "teachers and school officials can suspend disabled students from any category for only 10 days without then going to court to obtain permission from a judge to continue the suspension." In addition, many states have rules forbidding the use of physical restraint or aversives in dealing with aggressive students, insisting that only positive reinforcements—which fre-

quently do not control violent behavior—be used. And while teachers dealing directly with assaultive students may receive some training in handling violent behaviors, most students and teachers on regular campuses are unprepared to handle assaults.

The National School Boards Association also is critical of current policies regarding violent disabled students. NSBA spokesman Michael Resnick, commenting that "nondisabled students have rights too," says that school authorities should have the right to remove disruptive students and, if necessary, transfer them into special settings where their behaviors can be handled more safely.

Battling the teachers' and school board organizations are groups such as the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, which opposes any changes in the IDEA. Representatives from this organization and others staged a 1,000-person demonstration in Washington, D.C., this summer to protest proposed changes to the IDEA.

State and federal governments, however, appear to be in favor of narrowing the scope of the IDEA. Virginia, for instance, has gone to federal court to fight a ruling that it violates the IDEA when it suspends violent students. And Congress passed a bill in 1994 that allows schools to suspend disabled students for 45 days if they bring firearms to class.

U.S., Canada:

"Inclusion for all" questioned

As teachers and school districts begin to question the potential dangers of including all students—even those with dangerous behaviors—in regular classrooms, some are

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TREATMENT UPDATE ISSUE:

See articles on
risperidone, desipramine,
Norplant, and nutritional
therapies, in this issue.

Fluvoxamine, commonly used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), significantly improved compulsive behaviors in many subjects in this study. "One patient in a group home no longer had to stay in his room checking the wastebasket," the researchers report. "He could go to work." Other subjects stopped picking at scars that they previously had reopened continually.

Fluvoxamine belongs to a class of drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). The drug, approved for the treatment of OCD in 1995, is now being tested on autistic subjects because a large body of evidence suggests that autism involves abnormalities in the brain's use of serotonin, a "messenger" chemical.

Studies suggest that fluvoxamine is safer than Haldol and other neuroleptic drugs commonly used to treat autism. A report in the *Medical Letter on Drugs and Therapeutics* cautions, however, that the drug may interfere with the metabolism of other drugs, particularly benzodiazepines. The report also warns that "people who are taking lithium [or] Tegretol... should be careful when