Polypharmacy and Medicines Optimisation in Older People

NHS Eastern Cheshire CCG, NHS South Cheshire CCG and NHS Vale Royal CCG have agreed a policy on the identification and review of those patients over 65 years who are considered to be at greatest risk from inappropriate polypharmacy.

The policy promotes the use of the NHS Scotland Polypharmacy Guidance: Realistic Prescribing 3rd Edition.

This will support prescribers to stop medications that may cause harm, stop medicines that have limited evidence for use, highlight to prescribers those treatments that are often omitted and provide guidance for continuing medicines that are of benefit.

Background

Polypharmacy is often defined as the prescribing of ten or more medicines to one patient but there is no official number of medicines that defines the term. In the past, polypharmacy has been considered something to be avoided but in some cases it can be therapeutically beneficial. The purpose of this policy is to support prescribers in conducting polypharmacy reviews to determine whether prescribing of multiple medicines is appropriate or inappropriate for individual patients.

In the UK, 45% of prescriptions are dispensed to patients over 65 years of age, who represent just 18% of the population. In this age group, there is a higher level of multiple co-morbidities and corresponding prescribing of multiple medicines by multiple prescribers to treat these conditions. This, coupled with the pharmacodynamic and pharmacokinetic changes associated with aging and disease, increases the risk of patient safety incidents and can shift the balance of benefits and risks sufficiently to warrant the discontinuation of some medicines. Frailty, acute kidney injury (AKI) and anticholinergic burden (ACB) are among other areas that should be considered when reviewing the risk/benefit profile of medicines.

Implementation


There is also a quick reference guide available at: NHS Scotland Polypharmacy Guidance: Quick Reference Guide.

The Policy will be sent to General Practice and be made available via the Medicines Management Website.

References


National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Key Therapeutic Topic 18: Multimorbidity and Polypharmacy