ONTABA Calls for Action on the Inappropriate Use of Psychotropic Medication on Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

On August 23, 2017, Dr. Yona Lunsky and her colleagues in Ontario, Canada published an important study on the controversial use of antipsychotic medication for adults living with intellectual disabilities (Lunsky, Khuu, Tadrous, Vigod, Cobigo, & Gomes, 2017). They concluded that antipsychotic medications are often prescribed to individuals with developmental disabilities, although a large portion of these individuals have no psychiatric diagnosis. This report highlights the contentious and widespread practice of using “off label” antipsychotics on individuals with developmental disabilities for the purpose of managing challenging behaviour. Unfortunately, this is a common practice in group homes, day programs, schools, hospital inpatient units and outpatient settings that support individuals with intellectual disabilities. Many individuals remain on multiple high-potency psychotropic medications over long periods of time and experience life-altering and irreversible side-effects such as tardive dyskinesia, which can interfere with activities of daily living. Psychotropic medication use can also lead to negative health outcomes and adverse effects that promote little improvement in quality of life.

There is a large body of research demonstrating the efficacy of behaviour analytic services in treating challenging behaviours in individuals who have intellectual disabilities (Campbell, 2003; Didden, Duker, & Kozlizius,1997; Harvey, Boer, Meyer, & Evans, 2009; Heyvaert, Maes, Van den Noortgat, Kuppens, & Onghena, 2012; Lundervold & Bourland, 1988; Ma, 2009; Weisz, Weiss, Han, Granger, & Morton, 1995). There is also compelling research documenting the value of behaviour analysts working alongside prescribing practitioners to support careful evaluation of medication trials and data-based clinical decision making (Cox & Virues-Ortega, 2016; Crosland, Zarcone, Lindauer, Valdovinos, Zarcone, Hellings, & Schroeder, 2003; Danov, Tervo, Meyers, & Symons, 2012). Unfortunately, most social services and health care agencies in Ontario do not have dedicated behaviour analytic services, while the agencies that do have behaviour analytic services often have excessive waitlists, large consultant caseloads, and limited quality assurance mechanisms specific to the practice of behaviour analysis.

The Ontario Association for Behaviour Analysis (ONTABA) supports an interministerial strategy of well-funded, dedicated behaviour analytic services to address the overuse and misuse of psychotropic medication in this vulnerable population. An investment in behaviour analytic services is an investment in the health and safety of individuals with developmental disabilities.

ONTABA is committed to supporting prescribing practitioners when making decisions regarding the use of medication in the management of challenging behaviour. Together we can build supportive environments, teach skills that promote independence, and apply a humane and evidence-based approach to treating challenging behaviour.

ONTABA is a not-for-profit professional organization representing behaviour analysts in Ontario Canada. We serve as a resource for practitioners and users of behaviour analytic services, a respected community partner, and a dedicated advocate for individuals in need of life-changing behaviour analytic services. Our mission is to demonstrate leadership, knowledge, and innovation in education, training, and research for the ethical and effective application of behaviour analysis.

For more information please email us contact@ontaba.org