

Work related stress and pain

Dear Editor

The title of a recent article¹ 'Work related stress and pain: the role of complementary therapies' is ill conceived. No evidence is presented to justify a particular association between 'work' related conditions and complementary therapies.

There are inaccuracies. One paragraph touches on a Cochrane review by Gagnier et al² regarding the benefits of 'devil's claw' in back pain. The next paragraph begins, 'another Cochrane review', and goes on to touch on the benefits of 'white willow bark' in back pain. But, it is not 'another review', it is the same review by Gagnier et al. The reader is left with the impression that there are two separate reports indicating the benefits for complementary therapies in back pain.

The heading 'Stress/mental health' suggests these are interchangeable terms. They are not, but that is a longer debate. We are advised that a meta-analysis of 'mindfulness based stress reduction' was beneficial. While it is pointed out that participants meditated for 21.2 hours per week, there is no acknowledgment that the average worker could neither afford nor tolerate 3 hours of meditation, day in day out.

The most serious flaws in this article however, are misquotations. It is stated that, 'The review concluded that hypericum was equivalent to tricyclic antidepressants in the management of mild to moderate depression...' What the authors actually said was, 'In patients who meet criteria for major depression, several recent placebo controlled trials suggest that the tested hypericum extracts have minimal beneficial effects while other trials suggest that hypericum and standard antidepressants have similar beneficial effects.'³

It is stated that, 'Mindfulness based meditation demonstrated a statistically significant positive effect on both physical and mental health parameters'.¹ What the authors actually said was, '...these results suggest that mindfulness based stress reduction may help a broad range of individuals...'⁴ There is a world of difference between 'statistically significant' and the suggestion of a possibility.

This article claims to 'focus on evidence based' information. In fact, it distorts evidence based information.

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References

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3. Linde K. St John's wort for depression. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2005; Issue 2.
4. Grossman P, Niemann L, Schmidt S, Walach H. Mindfulness based stress reduction and health benefits: a meta-analysis. *J Psychosom Res* 2004;54:35-43.

Reply

Dear Editor

I certainly did not aim to mislead *AFP* readers nor to distort evidence based information as has been asserted. First, I was unable to fully expand on this broad topic due to the inescapable restrictions on word count that restrain any journal's authors. This obviously prevented me from discussing this topic as thoroughly as I would have liked.

In response to the reference to supposed 'misquotations', I refer to the 'main results' section of the Cochrane review which discusses the use of St John's wort in patients with depression, not restricted to major depression by Linde et al. The review states that in trials comparing SSRIs and tricyclic antidepressants to hypericum, the RRs were 0.98 (95% CI: 0.85-1.12) and 1.03 (95% CI: 0.93-1.14) respectively with patients taking hypericum dropping out of trials less frequently due to adverse effects than those taking tricyclics. I did not state that St John's wort had been shown to be more useful than standard antidepressants in major depression, however it does appear to have a role in mild to moderate depression, comparative to SSRIs and tricyclics. The entire review needs to be read to glean this.

The second comment about a supposed 'misquotation' relating to the Cochrane review on mindfulness based meditation by Grossman et al is also incorrect. The 'results' section of the review states that for both mental and physical health parameters, meditation showed a 'medium statistically significant effect', not simply a possibility of an effect.

As a practising GP, I obviously do not believe that stress and mental health are interchangeable words. The 'stress' aspect of the subtitle was related to the meditation review and the 'mental health' reference was related to the review of the complementary management of depression.

Regarding most workers not having time to meditate, unfortunately the figure was misprinted and should have read 2 1/2 hours per week not 21.2 hours [*Our apologies. Ed*]. This amounts to just over 20 minutes per day. I do not believe that to be particularly onerous.

The comment regarding the mention of 'another' Cochrane review was correct; this was an oversight and was not intended to mislead readers. I was referring to another section of the same review by Gagnier et al which discussed two high quality randomised controlled trials demonstrating the beneficial effects of white willow bark in low back pain and was referenced as such.

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