United Kingdom national media representations of medications used in dementia: a systematic content analysis

Carole Parsons and Sarah McNeill

School of Pharmacy, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

✉ c.parsons@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

- Newspapers contribute to public understanding and perceptions of health-related issues [1,2]
- Examination of news media reporting to examine what has been communicated to the public about medicines use in dementia has been limited to date
- Interrogating the stories told about medicines used in dementia in the news media can shed light on how they are popularly conceptualised and understood

Aim

- To investigate what has been communicated to the general public about medicines use in dementia via the most highly circulated newspapers in the UK over a ten-year period

Methods

- Systematic content analysis of newspaper reports about medications used in dementia in the 10 highest circulated UK newspapers from 2010 to 2019
- Nexis®UK was searched using terms relating to medications and treatment in dementia, and articles identified for inclusion.
- A standardised coding frame was developed, piloted, and used to code all included articles across three domains: structure (bibliographic details); content (information within each article); and judgement and rating (subjective variable related to information presented)
- Where an article was linked to a scientific journal article, this was retrieved, and the content cross-checked
- The quality of information in each of the newspaper articles was scored from 0-10 (lowest to highest quality). A score of 0-3 represented poor quality, 4-7 of average/good quality, and 8-10 very good/excellent quality information
- A second researcher independently coded a random sample (10%) of articles. Level of intercoder agreement was determined by calculation of Cohen's kappa value
- Ethical approval was not required for this study

References:
(1) Akintola O, Lavis JN, Hoskins, R. Print media coverage of primary healthcare and related research evidence in South Africa. Health Res Policy Syst. 2015;13:68
(2) Stanford FC, Tauqeer Z, Kyle TK. Media and its influence on obesity. Curr Obes Rep. 2018; 7(2):186–92.

Results

- Initial searches retrieved 1,264 newspaper articles, of which 100 satisfied study inclusion/exclusion criteria and were included in the main analysis
- Figure 1 details the newspapers which most frequently contained articles relating to medicines use in dementia and the numbers of articles published over the study period. The largest numbers of articles were published in 2011 and 2012 (n=18) and the smallest number in 2019 (n = 4), with no apparent trend observed over the study period
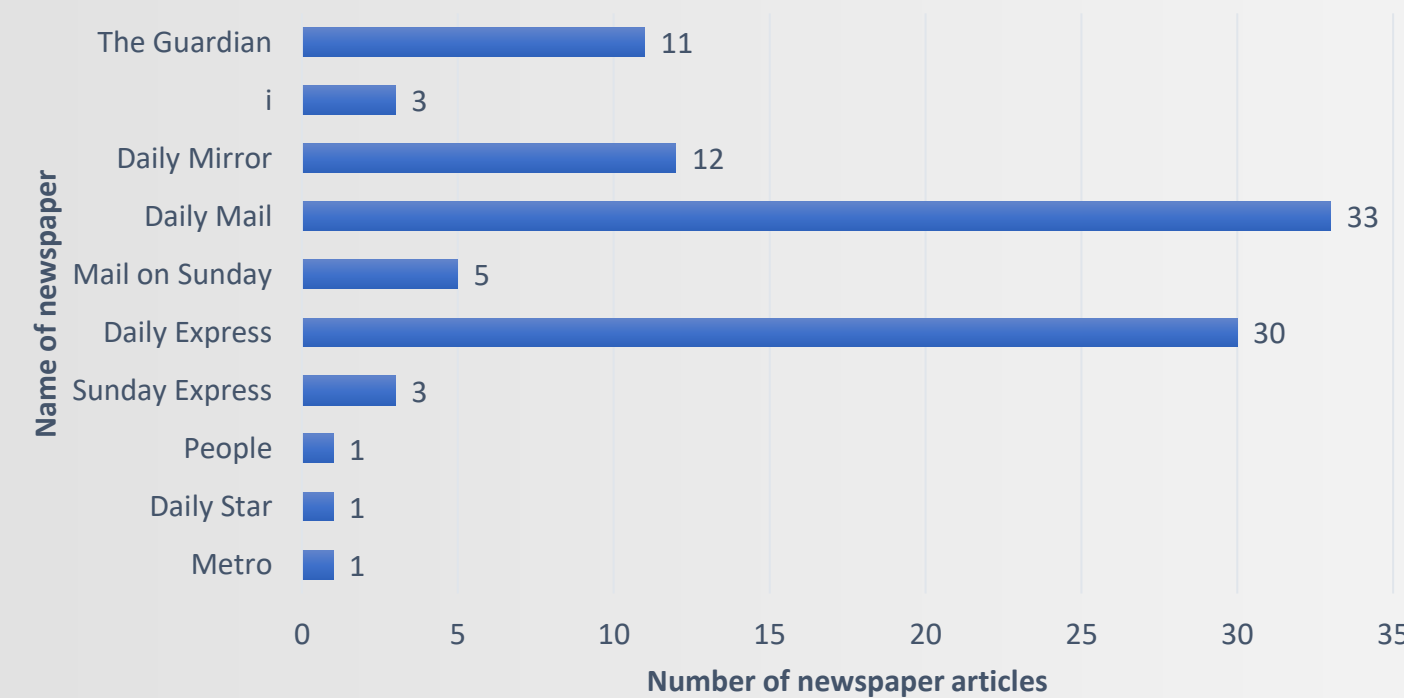

Figure 1. Frequency of newspaper articles about medicines use in dementia in the highest circulated UK newspapers (2010-2019 inclusive)

- Approximately three-quarters (74%) of included articles were attributed to a specified author. Of these, the majority (83.8%) were authored by journalists, with the remainder authored by science correspondents (12.2%) and healthcare professionals (4.1%)
- Most articles were written from a clinical perspective (82%), with smaller proportions written from a societal (10%), policy-related (4%) or economic (4%) perspective
- Scientists, researchers and academics were found to be the main voices for just under half (45%) of articles, while the main voice of the remainder were the health or pharmaceutical industry (22%), government (16%), healthcare professionals (6%), and patients/carers/relatives (1%). The main voice could not be specified for 10% of articles
- Just over three quarters of included articles (76%) included quotations from charities, patients, healthcare professionals, scientists/researchers/academics, and government bodies
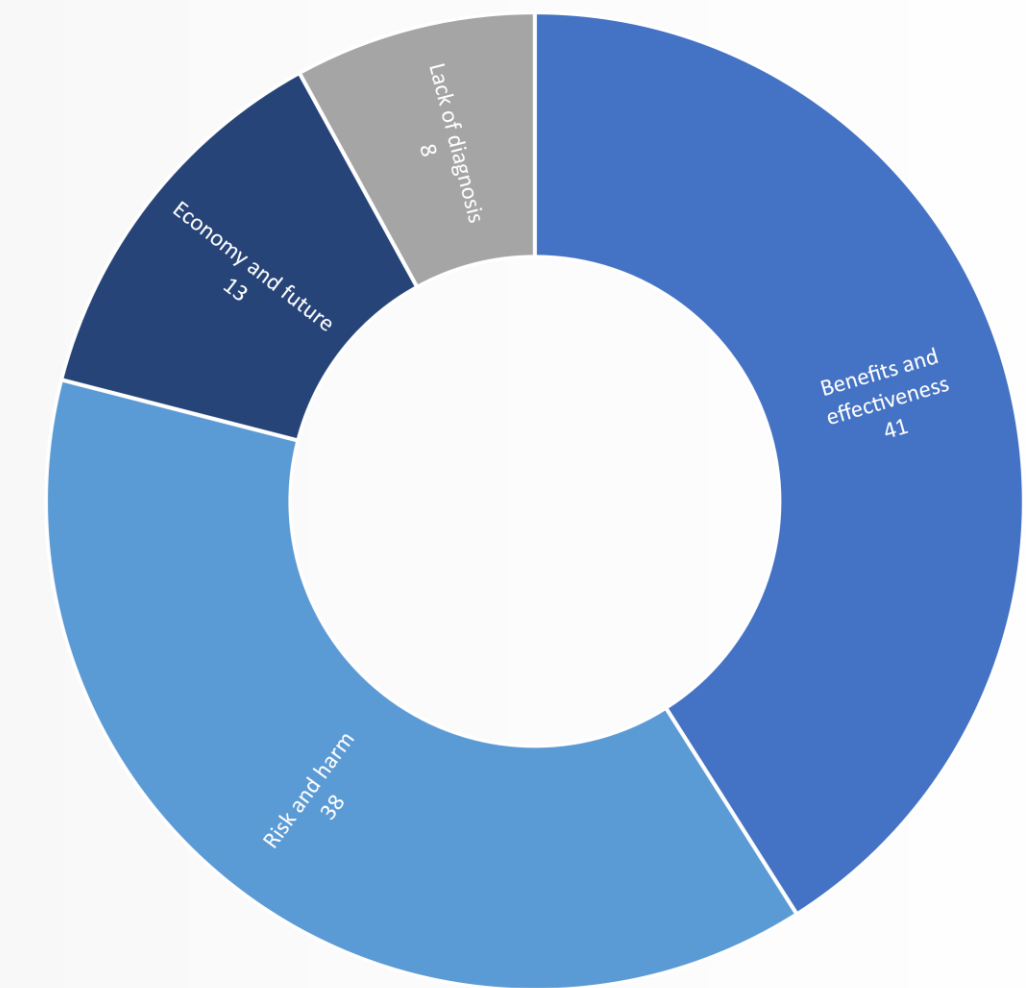

Figure 2. Main themes covered about medicines use in dementia in the newspaper articles (n=100)

- Main themes covered in the included articles are outlined in Figure 2. Starting therapy early and continuing in later stages of dementia were reported to maintain function and independence and slow decline. Antipsychotics, sedatives and opioid analgesics were considered to worsen symptoms and increase risk of death. Lack of diagnosis resulted in inability to obtain medication when people with dementia needed and would benefit from it. Lack of funding was highlighted as a barrier to research.
- Half of the included articles had a negative slant, 46% had a positive slant and 4% were neutral
- 94% of the included articles were judged as having a balanced judgment, with remaining 6% judged as being exaggerated
- Almost half of the included articles were judged to be excellent quality (45%), 35% were considered average and 20% were judged as poor quality
- Cohen's kappa values ranged from 0.63 to 1.00, indicating satisfactory agreement between coders

Conclusion

Benefits and effectiveness, risk and harm, lack of diagnosis, and funding and potential developments were the main themes of articles reporting medication use in dementia. There remains scope for improvement in quality of mass media communication regarding medications used in dementia. Strengths of this study include the systematic approach employed in content analysis, while limitations include exclusion of the Sun, the Times and the Telegraph due to lack of availability of circulation figures, and exclusion of media sources other than newspapers.