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Catatonia in a Liaison Psychiatry Service of a General Hospital: Prevalence and Clinical Features

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Introduction: Catatonia is a neuropsychiatric syndrome described in a variety of medical and psychiatric conditions. The prevalence and clinical features of this syndrome have not been studied sufficiently in patients in this clinical setting.

Objectives: To determine the prevalence and clinical features of catatonia in patients referred to a liaison psychiatry service at a general hospital.

Aim: Prospective, descriptive study.

Method: All patients referred to a liaison psychiatry service were screened for catatonic phenomena using the Bush–Francis Catatonia Screening Instrument (BFCSI), between January and May 2012. The prevalence and clinical features of catatonia were recorded.

Results: 236 patients were referred. Thirteen (5,5%) met research diagnostic criteria for catatonia and 10 (4,2%) DSM - IV criteria. Three of these patients suffered simultaneously with delirium. All patients presented with the inhibited variant of catatonia and 5 to 12 catatonic signs. 100% presented with immobility/stupor and staring gaze, 84,6% with mutism, 76,9% with rigidity, and 69% with negativism and withdrawal. Sixty-one percent presented with posturing/catalepsy, 53,8% with echophenomena and automatic obedience and 46,1% with stereotypies and grasp reflex, whilst 38,4% presented with grimacing and waxy flexibility. Mitgehen, Gegenhalten and autonomic abnormalities were found in 23% of cases. In 15,3% there were verbigeration, impulsivity, perseveration and combativeness. Excitement, mannerisms and ambitendency were not observed in any case.

Conclusion: Catatonia is not infrequent in patients referred to a liaison psychiatry service at a general hospital, and it presented with its inhibited variant in all cases. In 23% of patients catatonia occurred simultaneously with delirium.