

Psychological Screening Before Interferon Therapy

To the Editor:

We read with interest the Concise Review on Hepatitis C, Interferon, and Depression by Zdilar et al.¹ Although interferon causes neuropsychiatric disturbances that are usually modest, at least at the doses used for the treatment of chronic hepatitis C, it can precipitate manic-depressive psychosis and attempted or successful suicide.²⁻⁴ Moreover, it is not always possible to single out patients who on clinical grounds are likely to develop psychiatric side effects. We therefore believe that it is important to have a method, easy to carry out, reproducible, self-administered, and inexpensive, to screen all patients. The authors suggest using the Beck Depression Inventory, the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale, or the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depressed Mood Scale.

Since 1995, we have used the computerized version of the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) to screen all patients before interferon therapy, with psychiatric evaluation of those patients whose score is pathological. The computerized version of the MMPI is a self-evaluating test, composed of 566 items covering an extensive range of behaviors and attitudes. Patients must answer "true," "false," or "don't know." To assess the compliance, some items are repeated in a slightly different way throughout the test. The computer then determines a psychologic profile of the patient, dividing it into 13 scales representing different personality aspects, each expressed by a numerical score. For this scale, a score of 60 of 100 is considered the cut-off of normality. According to our experience,⁵ all patients who need psychopharmacologic therapy during interferon treatment are among those with a pathologic MMPI score before the beginning of therapy and who the psychiatrist consequently monitored. We are therefore able to identify these neuropsychiatric side effects at an early stage and, so far, none of our patients has had to stop interferon therapy for psychiatric disorders, even if some of them required antidepressant therapy.

ASTRID SCALORI, M.D.
*Department of Internal Medicine
 Policlinic of Milan
 University of Milan
 Milan, Italy
 Institute of Liver Studies
 King's College Hospital
 London, UK*

PAOLO APALE, M.D.
*Department of Neurology
 University of Milano-Bicocca
 S. Gerardo Hospital
 Monza, Italy*

LUIGI ROFFI, M.D.
*Department of Medicine
 Ospedale Civile
 Sondrio, Italy*

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