Instrument Development for Assessing Alcohol Withdrawal Symptoms
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Problem: The assessment of alcohol withdrawal symptoms (AWS) in the Addiction Treatment Program consists of assessing vital signs, patient self report of symptoms and nurse observation of symptoms using an ill-defined mild, moderate or severe scale. A more objective method of assessment is needed.

Evidence: The Clinical Institute of Withdrawal Assessment for Alcohol (CIWA-AR scale) (Sullivan et al., 1989) is considered the “gold standard” for assessing alcohol withdrawal symptoms. The Severity Assessment Scale (SAS) (Phillips et al., 2006) has also been evaluated and both are used when benzodiazepine is the detoxification medication being used. This pilot study will attempt to develop a sensitive instrument that is objective in assessing alcohol withdrawal symptoms (AWS), when Phenobarbital as the detoxification medication is used.

Strategy: The CIWA-AR and SAS will be compared to the current method being used. Practice Change: Nurse participants assessed a total 20 patients using the three methods of assessment for each patient. Comparing the results between the two established tools with the current method of assessment will provide the basis for deciding which method is the most sensitive description of the patient’s symptoms as they are treated with Phenobarbital for withdrawal.

Evaluation & Results: Preliminary findings indicate that ratings on the SAS were comparable to the “severe” category rating of the current method and patients received adequate medication for those "severe" ratings. The CIWA-AR ratings were not comparable to the “severe” category of the current method. If the CIWA-AR ratings had been used for medication decisions, the patients would not have received adequate medication.

Recommendations & Lessons Learned: For patients receiving Phenobarbital, developing an objective, evidence-based sensitive instrument similar to the SAS is indicated. The ratings on the SAS were comparable to the current broad categories and more detailed. A second study using the SAS with revisions is planned before instituting use of the instrument in practice.

Bibliography