LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The search for mediators of vascular mortality with mania


In a recent issue of Revista Brasileira de Psiquiatria, Chiarani et al. reported a unique investigation to identify hypothesized state or trait biomarkers for cardiovascular risk in bipolar disorder. Large, epidemiological studies have consistently found an increased risk of cardiovascular mortality in bipolar disorder, approximately twice that expected on the basis of age and gender. This risk is higher in bipolar I disorder, which conveys a greater burden of manic and hypomanic symptomatology, than in bipolar II disorder. The time course by which vasculopathy develops in bipolar disorder is unclear, although cross-sectional data suggest the excess risk is acquired over the long-term course of illness in those with a more persistent symptomatology. Cardiovascular mortality and endothelial dysfunction are related to manic symptom burden in a dose-dependent fashion, as demonstrated in a well-characterized prospective cohort, though specific mediators that may explain this apparent state-related risk remain elusive.

To identify state-related differences in potential mediators, Chiarani et al. followed individuals with mania to a period of euthymia, and utilized a separate control group to identify trait differences. No biomarkers associated with cardiovascular risk were associated with mania, apart from reductions in ferritin, an acute phase reactant. It is not clear how to interpret this finding. If not a false positive finding or the result of historical/instrument bias, it could reflect differences in diet, though low ferritin seems unlikely to explain any state-dependent effects on vascular disease risk. Putative physiological changes include, but are not limited to, autonomic nervous system dysfunction, dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, oxidative stress, and pro-inflammatory cytokines. Behavioral influences may involve adherence to treatment, diet, physical activity, and tobacco or other drug use.

Although cases of late onset or post-stroke mania may challenge this rule, bipolar disorder can generally be considered to precede vascular disease. Barring confounding, this temporal relationship could be explained by a causal pathway leading from bipolar disorder to vascular disease, mediated by unknown variables presumably influenced by mood state. As shown in Figure 1, a non-causal relationship between bipolar disorder and vascular disease could also demonstrate temporality through a shared risk factor with causal pathways of varying durations for lag times from exposure to outcome.

Future research to investigate the most relevant mechanisms by which bipolar disorder and mood states may impact cardiovascular risk is required. The study design used by Chiarani et al. may serve as a template to survey state- and trait-dependent variables which may mediate risk of vascular disease. It is further important to mind the authors’ concluding message: integrated medical and psychiatric care is needed to clinically address the medical comorbidities frequently present in those with bipolar disorder.

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