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UGA pharmacist available to discuss antismoking drug Chantix

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Athens, Ga. – W. Klugh Kennedy, clinical associate professor in the UGA College of Pharmacy, was part of a team that was among the first to describe psychiatric side effects in a patient taking Chantix (varenicline), a prescription medication used to help patients stop smoking. Kennedy, Pharm. D and a board certified psychiatric pharmacist, specializes in the drug therapy and treatment of individuals with mental illnesses.

On Wednesday, the Federal Aviation Administration banned pilots and air traffic controllers from using the drug. In February, the Food and Drug Administration issued a public health advisory on the drug.

“A large percentage of psychiatric patients smoke, and one of the things that we have noticed is that psychiatric patients taking Chantix sometimes get worse,” Kennedy said. “We had a case where a patient’s psychiatric symptoms got much worse while taking the drug. When the drug was stopped, the patient got better. Once the drug was started again, the patient got worse again. There was a high likelihood that his worsening symptoms were associated with the drug, and at that point, to our knowledge, this adverse effect had not yet been reported in the scientific literature.”

Kennedy and his colleagues first presented a case report in April 2007 at the annual meeting of the College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists in Colorado Springs, CO. They published the report along with a review of the literature in the February 2008 issue of *The Annals of Pharmacotherapy*.

Kennedy said he is concerned about an over reaction against the drug. The message for patients, he said, is to discuss any history of mental illness with their doctors and pharmacists.

“Chantix definitely helps individuals who want to quit smoking if it’s used in conjunction with a good smoking cessation program,” he said. “But like every other medication on the market, it does have risks. It’s important that patients taking Chantix let their pharmacist and prescriber know about any mental health issues, including any family history, since this drug has the potential to cause adverse psychiatric events. The individual and their health care providers can jointly make an informed decision about the risks versus benefits of using Chantix or any other medication.”

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