Propofol is a potent anaesthetic drug and also an effective sedative agent. Also, propofol may be used for non-anaesthetic purposes such as the treatment of seizures, migraine and tension headache in clinical practice. It has been abused, particularly among healthcare providers with high mortality rate. This report presents the case of a propofol-dependent patient who was an emergency medicine doctor with no difficulties in obtaining the drug. He himself visited our clinic for the treatment of propofol dependence. We started the patient's treatment with pharmacotherapeutic medicines and individual psychotherapy. Fourteen days after starting the therapy, the patient was discharged from hospital on his own will and he did not attend the follow-up visits in the outpatient clinic. Then, we were informed of his death, which was suspected to have occurred owing to drug intoxication in the hospital in which he worked. Nevertheless, the reason of death was important; the importance of this case report is to provide information regarding the drug's dependence profile. This is the first case report indicating propofol dependence in Turkey. Because of its easy access, rapid onset time and short duration of action, propofol dependence is increasing. We think that adding propofol to the controlled drug list and improving the knowledge of the clinicians regarding its abuse potential may limit the dependence cases.

Keywords: Propofol, dependence, euphoria, abuse

Abstract

Propofol is an intravenous agent used for sedation or induction of general anaesthesia. Short acting time, fast recovery, few side-effects and amnestic properties are the advantages of the drug in clinical practice. Unconsciousness occurs at 30 s after the injection of 1.5–2.5-mg kg⁻¹ propofol and lasts up to 5–10 min (1, 2). Propofol has many clinical uses outside of the operating room such as to treat seizure, migraine, tension headache and alcohol abstinence or to sedate the patients while performing electroconvulsive therapy, gastrointestinal or any other unpleasant procedures (1-4). The increasing usage of the drug for different procedures results in an increasing number of human exposure. Patients who are medical professionals or lay persons reported pleasant and euphoric effects without any residual effects and high satisfaction rates after usage (2-5). In light of the above-mentioned information, medical professionals thought that the drug may have abuse potential; this hypothesis was supported with several case reports (6-9). The most remarkable report was the case of Michael Jackson (7). However, the drug is not regulated as a controlled substance in any country, except South Korea (10). Hence, propofol dependence case reports still preserve value to demand attention toward its potential abuse. Particularly, addiction case reports rather than death reports with propofol increase the knowledge regarding psychiatric management of propofol addiction. Therefore, we report a propofol-dependent emergency medicine doctor who gave up our psychiatric therapy on his own will; after sometime, he was found dead in his emergency service due to suspected propofol overdose.

Case Presentation

The patient was a 29-year-old male emergency medicine doctor who was admitted to the psychiatry clinic on his own will because of his propofol addiction that continued for 2 years. During these 2 years, he stopped using propofol for 2 months on his own will on account of his marriage. However, he started abusing propofol again. After his unsuccessful efforts, he was convinced to attend a psychiatric rehabilitation program. He was hospitalised after his first evaluation.

He had started to use propofol repeatedly for relieving pain caused by nephrolithiasis. He did not have a history of any drug abuse, except a history of smoking. After repeated drug exposures for pain relief, he started to use it for recreational
purposes because of its pleasant effects. He reported that his energy and courage increased, and that he felt happier and relaxed after propofol use. He did not report any unpleasant residual effects or withdrawal symptoms. When he visited for therapy, he was using approximately up to 40–50-mg propofol per injection and a total of 200–300-mg propofol per day intravenously. Tolerance for the desired effects did not occur. He reported that he had obtained the drug from the hospital easily. The most important reason for craving the drug was the feeling of euphoria and relaxation.

After his first examination, it was found that his general physical status and appearance was compatible with his age and socioeconomic status. His attention and concentration was disoriented. His mood was depressed, thoughts were rational and objective and speaking tone as well as speaking speed were low. Blood and urine analyses were normal; no psychoactive substance was determined in urine.

In pharmacological treatment, diazepam, quetiapine and sertraline were used. Diazepam was ceased in a week by gradually decreasing the dose. Supportive and cognitive psychotherapy interviews were conducted with the patient, and the patient was asked to participate in the group therapies for addicted patients that were performed for 4 days per week. He did not show any withdrawal symptoms. However, after 14 days, he refused to participate in therapies any further and left the hospital. After 2 years, it was learnt that the patient was found dead in his study room at the hospital’s emergency department due to suspected propofol overdose. Because of legal difficulties, we cannot report the post-mortem examination. Written informed consent was provided from the patient’s next of kin for this case report.

Discussion

This case was the first propofol addiction reported in Turkey, and this study is the first case report in the literature of an emergency medicine doctor who became dependent on propofol. Since 1992, propofol has been discussed with regard to its abuse potential after the first propofol addiction case report (11). Propofol has several desirable properties superior to those of other sedatives such as easy access, rapid onset of action, short duration of action and minimal or no residual side-effects (12). These properties may be the major factor for the increase in the number of addiction cases. The first propofol addiction case report documented a patient who preferred propofol to midazolam and fentanyl because of its advantages, as described above (11). In addition to the above-mentioned advantages, this patient started using propofol for stress relief, which was eventually followed by craving (11). In several reports, most cases of propofol dependence were not after propofol anaesthesia for an operation. Although they may experience the same effects, these patients do not know to which drug is used for anaesthesia. Therefore, authors thought that these patients are not under the risk of propofol addiction. A majority of propofol abusers use the drug for non-anaesthetic purposes such as stress relief, insomnia relief, pain relief and euphoria (3, 9, 11, 13). Headache treatments, gastrointestinal endoscopic procedures or nephrolithiasis pain relief such as the case of our patient are some methods to meet and experience propofol effects. These procedures are mostly performed by healthcare providers who are not anaesthesiologists and who are not well learned regarding the pleasant effects of propofol and its abuse potential. However, because of its easy access and lack of sufficient information regarding its routine use in medical textbooks, some anaesthesiologists also may not be aware of its abuse potential. Thus, case reports regarding propofol dependence are important to improve the knowledge of the healthcare providers.

Healthcare providers who use propofol may know its pleasant effects and may abuse the drug without any personal experience. A review examined propofol abuse or dependence cases between 1992 and 2007 and reported that propofol dependence resulted in the death of 38 patients. Nine of them were anaesthesiologists and three were other medical professionals (12). According to this data, propofol dependence is a very dangerous addiction because of its high mortality rate owing to unconsciousness and apnoea even with low doses.

We know that propofol causes euphoria, stress relief, sexual fantasies and dreams as well as sexual disinhibition; thus, psychological dependence is more common than physical dependence (12). Studies regarding the subjective effects of propofol reported that drug evokes positive feelings, such as happiness, after injections (5, 14); it has a very high Morphine–Benzedrine Group (MBG) Scale, which is used as an index of euphoria scores, similar to that for morphine or marijuana that are highly abused drugs (5). Our patient’s dependence pattern is compatible with this data similar to that of patients in other case reports (11, 13). For the patient, euphoria was the most important reason for craving the drug. Including drug-craving behaviour, our patient showed other strong dependence symptoms such as loss of control, continued use of the drug despite social life disruption and incompatibility with psychiatric treatments. In addition, this case shows the failure of usual addiction psychotherapy for propofol addiction. Under these conditions, we thought that reporting propofol-dependent patients who are followed up by a psychiatrist is more important than reporting deaths caused by propofol to provide improvement in the knowledge of propofol addiction treatment.

Similar to all other countries worldwide, except South Korea, propofol dispensing is not restricted and not under control in our country. Strict control may not eradicate propofol abuse but easy access conditions may continue to increase propofol abuse. Hence, it should not be ignored that it is essential for the ministries of health to take precautions regarding propofol dispensing.
Conclusion

The above-mentioned case reports and clinical studies show that propofol has a serious abuse potential because of its pleasurable subjective effects and inconsiderable residual effects that cause social life disruptions or death of lay persons or medical professionals. Easy drug access and insufficient knowledge of healthcare providers are contributing factors for its increased abuse frequency. Here, we have attempted to highlight the potential danger regarding increase in propofol dependence as well as to highlight the importance of the knowledge of clinicians and for taking appropriate precautions for its dispensing.

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from patients’ parents who participated in this case.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.


Acknowledgements: Thanks to Dr. Pelin Kaplan Sayan and Doç. Dr. Hasan Mırsal for their contributions in the treatment of the case.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

Financial Disclosure: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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