Telegraph

Should you warn about serious mental health issues in a Tube ad?

An ad referring to akathisia, a side-effect of psychiatric drugs, has drawn both criticism and praise from clinicians and patients alike

[*By*Miranda Levy](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/https%3A/www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/m/mf-mj/Miranda-Levy/)14 April 2022 • 11:00am

This week, travellers on the London Underground are being treated to a rather different fare than adverts for Jointace dietary supplements or a little known poem by Keats.

“Antidepressants and antipsychotics are two classes of psychiatric drugs that can cause akathisia,” warns the ad, white text on black background, in one of those strips you see above the seats. “Akathisia is a rare, drug-induced condition that can cause violence, self-harm, and medication-induced suicide. Knowing the symptoms of akathisia will save lives”. Then follows a reference to [MISSD.co](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/http%3A/missd.co/), the Medication-Induced and Suicide Prevention Foundation, which has paid for 1,000 such ads to run on the tube for the next three weeks, following a campaign in US cities including New York and San Francisco.

Most people will – mercifully – be unfamiliar with the term akathisia, and its awful manifestations. Akathisia refers to a side-effect, chiefly caused by psychiatric drugs, ranging from a sense of mental unease and anxiety to severe emotional turmoil. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders describes it as “restlessness, fidgeting of the legs, rocking, pacing, and the inability to sit or stand still” – and the condition is often accompanied by these physical symptoms. Some sufferers find it so unbearable that they end their lives, or even harm others.

Akathisia has historically been linked to the use of antipsychotics for “unsexy” conditions such as schizophrenia: estimates reckon that somewhere between 50 and 80 per cent of people on antipsychotics suffer from akathisia. However, it’s increasingly being linked to antidepressants – in as many as one in five patients who take these drugs.

That said, according to a spokesperson at the [MSSD.co](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/http%3A/mssd.co/), the British advertising code CAP made changes to the American version of the ad, insisting on the addition of the word “rare” to describe the incidence of akathisia.

Has anyone else seen these ads - on the Victoria line today? [@DrAdrianJames](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/https%3A/twitter.com/DrAdrianJames?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) [@ProfRobHoward](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/https%3A/twitter.com/ProfRobHoward?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) Not helpful - should be removed [pic.twitter.com/TDNznbUZ2V](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/https%3A/t.co/TDNznbUZ2V)

— Anthony David (@ProfTonyDavid) [April 8, 2022](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/https%3A/twitter.com/ProfTonyDavid/status/1512467035837640708?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

Stewart Dolin, the 57-year-old lawyer in whose memory MISSD was set up, took his own life in Chicago in 2010 – six days after starting an SSRI antidepressant. Of course, it’s impossible to prove the direct cause of Dolin’s death, but family and friends noted his extreme distress and agitation immediately after he started taking the drug.

So the Tube advert in itself was notable, but it immediately kicked off a combative thread on social media. Professor Anthony David, Director of the UCL Institute of Mental Health, tweeted a photo of the ad, tagged some psychiatry colleagues, and commented that it was “not helpful”, and should be taken down. This response prompted tens of messages from those in the “prescribed harm community,” who feel they have suffered as a result of taking psychiatric drugs.

“Where is the empathy towards those that suffer from life-threatening akathisia? Akathisia isn’t rare,” tweeted Rose Yesha. “Seldom disclosed as a potential side effect. Akathisia is often misdiagnosed as anxiety. Common sentiment before someone with aka (sic) dies by suicide: ‘My doc doesn’t believe me’”. Many commentators agreed with Yesha; for example, nurse Angela Howard wrote: “May I enquire what your objection is to millions of people being warned about akathisia as being a risk factor for suicide being issued to the general public?”

On the other side were the doctors who came in defence of their colleagues – for example, @DrMayJay, who wrote: “Not helpful & wholly harmful if somebody suddenly stops their medication after reading this, or doesn’t ask for help for fear of this!”

The akathisia ad furore is the latest in a series of controversies around psychiatric drugs: their side effects, and withdrawal symptoms, leading to some asking whether they work, or should ever be prescribed at all. Though it does have to be said that many people find antidepressants helpful: life-saving, even.

In September 2019, the Royal College of Psychiatrists released a statement finally admitting that antidepressants and tranquilisers could have significant side effects, and a May 2021 prestigious Cochrane report on new-generation antidepressants concluded that the drugs only worked “in a small and unimportant way”, warning that suicide‐related thinking and behaviour “may be increased in those taking these medications”.

“The fact we need to have these posters represents a failing in psychiatry – that doctors aren’t telling people about the side effects of medication,” says John Read, professor of psychology at the University of East London. “A grieving family has to resort to billboards: that says it all. We’ve known about akathisia for 40 years or so, yet doctors are bound by the principle of informed consent – and they aren’t always informing their patients. Some even tell their patients that restlessness is “part of their illness”.

Is there not a danger, however, that a person on psychiatric medications may see these posters, and stop taking them immediately, leading to withdrawal effects that can be equally, or more dangerous? Wendy Burn is a consultant in old age psychiatry and was president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists from 2017 to 2020. “This poster is not telling people how dangerous it could be to suddenly stop their medications,” she says. “I’m also concerned that it’s displayed on a Tube line: what if someone in distress read this, who was thinking of jumping under a train? Most importantly, if an advert mentions suicide, there really should be a suggestion of where to get help. I have every sympathy with the people behind the advert, but I’m not sure this is the best way to raise awareness.”

*For more help or information please contact Samaritans on 116 123,  or email them at: jo@samaritans.org or visit their website:*[*https://www.samaritans.org*](https://web.archive.org/web/20220414112325/https%3A/www.samaritans.org/)

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