Constipation is an under-recognised life-threatening adverse effect of clozapine

Clozapine has been associated with varying degrees of impairment of intestinal peristalsis, ranging from constipation to intestinal obstruction, faecal impaction and paralytic ileus. On rare occasions these cases have been fatal.

There have been a number of serious incidents in the last two years involving NTW community patients taking clozapine. One patient had his entire colon removed and now has a stoma. Another patient was admitted to hospital with severe abdominal pain and was diagnosed with a twisted bowel as a result of constipation. The patient did not survive the corrective surgery.

Learning Points:

- Educate patients about the risk of constipation
- Screen regularly asking the patient about change in bowel habits and change in appetite
- Ensure adequate fluid intake
- Ensure adequate dietary fibre intake
- Increase mobility / exercise
- Intervene actively when patients report constipation ensuring that an effective laxative regimen is prescribed promptly
- Stop other medicines that may be contributing to constipation
- Reduce clozapine dose if possible
- Request an abdominal examination if indicated
- Refer urgently all patients who present with symptoms indicating a potentially life-threatening gastrointestinal complication - clozapine should be temporarily discontinued

See PPT-PGN-05 Safe Prescribing of Clozapine