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Scopolamine-induced mania: 'Theoretically possible, but statistically improbable'

Dr. Emjay Tan's case study of a 36-year-old man who became "Manic after taking a vacation" (Cases That Test Your Skills, CURRENT PSYCHIATRY, April 2016, p. 45-50) is off the mark by attributing the manic episode to scopolamine—theoretically possible, but statistically improbable.

Dr. Tan may be unaware of a more frequent event: vacation hypomania. About one-third of my bipolar disorder patients had their first manic episode while on an overseas vacation or upon their return. It isn't the fun, excitement, or novelty of a

vacation that triggers the episode, but sleep deprivation, which is part and parcel of such events, particularly when they involve a holiday in a substantially different time zone.

Few people get to sleep more than a few hours the night before departing on a vacation; there's so much to do: packing, getting to the airport hours before the flight, etc. Not many people sleep soundly on the plane, and many experience the effects of jet lag both during the first few days of vacation and when the vacationer returns home. Many vacations come with substantial and protracted sleep deprivation, and sleep deprivation is an excellent way to trigger a hypomanic episode. I suspect that is why Dr. Tan's patient, who did not have a history of psychiatric symptoms, but who might have been genetically predisposed, became manifestly symptomatic shortly following his return from an overseas holiday.

Of course, it isn't just first episodes of hypomania that are triggered by sleep deprivation in patients with undiagnosed bipolar disorder; the event is common in the lives of people who already receive treatment.

Accordingly, my patients know that I might increase their lithium dosage for at least a few days to give them added protection as they head overseas, coupled with advice to do their best to get proper sleep.

Despite such prophylaxis, many of my bipolar disorder patients have taken a long flight overseas and, then, after half a day in the air, continued "flying." To the best of my knowledge, none ever took scopolamine.

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