THE EFFECT OF COMORBIDITY IN
ADULT MAJOR DEPRESSION

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Introduction

This dissertation describes and discusses the clinical research I have completed while employed as a Research Registrar at the Department of Psychological Medicine, Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences. The aim of the research has been to cast some light on which factors in adult major depression may have a bearing on the outcome of treatment.

The area of particular interest I have developed has been the effect of comorbidity. Comorbidity is a topic of considerable interest in psychiatry at the present time, but its clinical effects remain surprisingly elusive. Despite an explosion of clinical research in recent years there is still a paucity of published data on the effects of comorbidity. There is, however, a widely held view that comorbidity equals adversity. Given the lack of published evidence, I was interested to see what the data we gathered here in Christchurch, in a prospective clinical study that was set up to examine predictors of response to nortriptyline and fluoxetine in a sample of depressed outpatients, would reveal. The study is described in detail in Chapter Two of this dissertation, and was carried out at the above-mentioned Department of Psychological Medicine, where I worked while also participating in the Christchurch Psychiatric Registrar Training Programme.

There were two main reasons for my choice of alcohol dependence and panic disorder as the comorbid conditions I would investigate. Firstly, they are both common disorders, often with major effects on people’s lives. In the study referred to above, the two most common diagnoses comorbid with major depression were found to be alcohol dependence and panic disorder. Secondly, as mentioned, many clinicians aver that to have major depression plus one or other of these disorders is significantly worse in terms of severity of symptoms and prognosis than merely being depressed.

My data analysis, literature review and discussion on the effect of alcohol dependence in adult major depression have already been published in the Journal of Affective Disorders as a research paper, with myself as first author (Rae et al, 2002). Here I have merged that paper with my work on the effects of panic disorder to create a single coherent presentation on the topic of comorbidity in major depression.

Chapter One presents an overview of comorbidity before introducing a detailed review of the two comorbid disorders of interest.

Chapter Two outlines the Christchurch Outcome of Depression study in which I was a member of the research team and from which I derived the data presented in this dissertation. I then describe my own work on comorbidity.
Chapter Three presents the results of my analyses pertaining to alcohol dependence and to panic disorder as comorbid diagnoses.

Chapter Four discusses these results, comparing and contrasting them with previous published results and examining possible reasons for differences between my findings and others’. I finish with the implications of my work for the clinical management of adult major depression, and some thoughts on the current state of research into comorbidity.