Describe and evaluate two treatments for schizophrenia.

(25 marks)

There is an immediate need to alleviate the psychological problems like schizophrenia which are distressing to the sufferer, using forms of therapy. Chemotherapy is one form of treatment, and this uses antipsychotic drugs. New ‘atypical’ antipsychotics have been developed e.g. clozapine and are less likely to cause extrapyramidal symptoms. Clozapine is the first atypical drug shown to be effective in treating participants who failed to respond to ‘typical’ antipsychotics like chlorpromazine (Gelder et al 1999).

Extrapyramidal symptoms are disabling side effects which tend to affect patients receiving long term treatment, and they include severe restlessness and agitation, acute involuntary muscle contraction and tardive dyskinesia, a late onset irreversible movement disorder, involving involuntary facial movements and affects 25% of all patients who have taken antipsychotics for more than 7 years. Jeste et al. (1995) found tardive dyskinesia rates after 9 months of treatment of 30% for conventional antipsychotics but just 5% for atypical antipsychotics, meaning atypical antipsychotics are more appropriate as they have fewer side effects so patients are more likely to see more of the benefits of the treatment.

First generation ‘typical’ drugs (since 1950s) had side effects including Parkinsonian effects like a shuffling gait and shakiness; restlessness and sexual dysfunction. Second generation ‘atypical’ drugs (more recent) have side effects also, such as sleepiness, weight gain and increased chance of developing diabetes. Parkinsonian side effects may also be present.

Antipsychotics work by blocking D2 dopamine receptors, resulting in reduced synaptic activity in neurons which utilise dopamine which has been implicated to cause schizophrenia symptoms. The hypothalamus contains dopaminergic neurones so antipsychotics affect the functions of the hypothalamus e.g. by preventing arousal signals being sent to the cortex. The use of antipsychotics became popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Lamb (1984) found that prior to the 1980s it was estimated that 2 of 3 patients would spend their lives in a psychiatric institution, however post-1980s the average length of stay is down to around 2 months, showing an improvement in the therapy meaning patients weren’t required to stay in an institution for as long.

Psychoactive drugs usually relieve suffering quickly and form a relatively inexpensive treatment when compared to psychological therapies, so this is useful as more people can be treated due to the costs being low. Maintenance Drug treatment can prevent schizophrenic patients relapsing, so this shows it is effective in relieving the suffering and making sure it does not return. It also makes logical sense to treat the result of biological factors physically i.e. with drugs. However, the side effects discussed can be very disabling to the patients, and original antipsychotics were only effective in treating positive (not negative) symptoms, so some types of schizophrenia cannot be treated with drugs. The