

ANTIDEPRESSANTS: A RISKY REMEDY

In today's world, everyone from expert scientists to Hollywood stars has an opinion on prescription drug use, specifically antidepressants. Tom Cruise expressed his disapproval of the use of antidepressants in an interview for the *Today Show*, stating that such drugs are "very dangerous" and "there is no such thing as a chemical imbalance", sparking an uproar of defense from experts across the nation (Boyles par 15). Much has to be considered when evaluating the validity of such claims and forming an opinion on the issue of antidepressants. Antidepressants were first introduced in the 1950's with a drug originally intended for schizophrenia (Monroe 18). Since then, many types have been developed, the most common being tricyclics (TCAs), monamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), and selective serotonin reuptake



The controversy surrounding antidepressants is heightened their growing popularity.

inhibitors (SSRIs), each working in a different way on specific chemicals in the brain (Monroe 13). With over 28 million Americans taking prescription antidepressants today, an increasing amount of people are becoming involved in the controversy surrounding these drugs and the effects they have on users (Glenmullen, "Prozac: Pro" par 5). Opponents of antidepressants believe that such drugs are

extremely harmful to the user and cause severe side effects such as sexual dysfunction, neurological disorders, dependence and suicidal tendencies, going as far to say that they may even be toxic to the brain. Supporters of these drugs stress the effectiveness of antidepressants in treating depression, allowing sufferers to be almost completely unaffected by their illness and claim the side effects of the drugs are greatly exaggerated by the media. By enforcing more strict regulations on antidepressants, allowing only licensed mental health professionals to prescribe these drugs, and supplying patients with pertinent information regarding antidepressants including that on alternatives, a compromise may be reached.

ARGUMENTS OPPOSING ANTIDEPRESSANT USE

While many can attest to the positive effects of antidepressants, experts have recently related many alarming side effects of the drugs, causing patients to reconsider their usage. Many patients are concerned about such adverse reactions as involuntary movements, nausea, sedation, insomnia, and interaction with other drugs that could cause serotonin syndrome, characterized by "racing heart, high fever, high blood pressure and sometimes delirium" ("What are the Real Risks" par 10). One of the most

dangerous side effects is the risk of suicidal or violent thought and behavior; over 20,000 cases of such feelings and actions have been reported to the FDA (Packard 40). These tendencies are believed to be caused by an “overstimulation reaction” to the drugs and are especially common in teenagers and children (Glenmullen, “Prozac: Pro” par 6). “The FDA has received countless reports of Prozac patients hurting or even killing others and then committing suicide...the number of negative reactions to this antidepressant is growing” (Packard 41). The realization of the severity of the adverse effects have caused the FDA to investigate reports and take measures to inform the public on the results, however, many call for more drastic measures.

While the side effects of the drugs are very disturbing, equally alarming are the reports of doctors over-prescribing medications who do not know enough about depression to do so. Pharmacist Vincent D’Amore reports that “any physician can prescribe antidepressants” (D’Amore). About 70% of patients get their prescriptions from primary care physicians who “often have neither the time nor the expertise to fully evaluate their patients’ mental health and advise them about different therapies.” These doctors “feel pressured by health insurers not to refer patients to specialists” (Glenmullen, “Prozac: Pro” par 5). The knowledge of such drugs of a licensed psychiatrist greatly exceeds that of a regular medical practitioner who at many times only turns to medication to cure patient’s ailments, evident by the growing population of patients taking antidepressants. Although severe depression only affects 19 million Americans, over 60 million prescriptions for SSRIs, a specific type of antidepressant, have been written to date (Shaw par 3). In addition, some experts claim that the very drugs that doctors are over-prescribing are actually not essential. “Perhaps worst of all in the doctor’s opinion, antidepressants are largely unneeded. More than 90% of patients who get depressed get over it without ever seeing a doctor” (Ko par 8). Experts also report of placebos evoking the same response as antidepressants in up to 80% of patients (Boyles par 11). A particularly worrisome study found that “nearly half of people on new antidepressants have taken the drugs for a year or more, even though these drugs haven’t been tested for long term use” and that “as many as 75% of patients are on antidepressants for mild—even trivial—conditions” (Shaw par 5). The over-prescribing of antidepressants and the uninformed patients adds to the controversy surrounding these drugs.

Many patients are now turning to alternatives to antidepressants to avoid the problems that accompany the drugs. Numerous experts believe that a number of these herbal alternatives may be more

effective than prescription antidepressants with less severe side effects. St. John's wort is rapidly becoming the most popular alternative, selling 66 million doses daily because of its healing capacity. The herb



This herb, St. John's Wort, is proven to alleviate symptoms of depression as well as many other mood disorders.

increases levels of serotonin by blocking a chemical that makes them inactive, much like an MAOI and is twice more effective than placebo ("A Natural Remedy" par 8). "Overall, St. John's wort works as an antidepressant for around seventy percent of people who use it. This is the same percentage as for all other antidepressants (Zuess 24) In addition to being highly useful, St. John's wort rarely has side effects, observed in only 2.4% of users, which are mild if they occur, making them more

desirable than prescription drugs (Zuess 25). Besides St. John's wort, other herbs are effective in treating depression such as

SAM-e, Ginkgo biloba, kava, and lemon balm, as well as lifestyle changes such as diet and exercise (Reynolds). Endorphins released through exercise help alleviate depression and do not result in any adverse effects. Diet high in fruits, vegetables, and omega 3 fatty acids is especially helpful and helps to stabilize mood. Psychotherapy is also stressed by many experts, both those supporting and opposing prescription antidepressants because it is extremely effective and enduring. Opponents of the drugs stress that using alternatives results in the same positive outcome as antidepressants without possibility of side effects, making them more desirable and ultimately more effective because of greater long-term use.

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING ANTIDEPRESSANT USE

With so much controversy surrounding the issue of antidepressants, many people have attested to the positive effect such drugs have had on their lives. Many believe that the benefits outweigh the risks involved in taking these drugs and experts have test results to support such views. "About 60-70% of studies show that antidepressants outperform placebos in reducing and managing depression" (Quitkin par 8). Supporters argue that such results could not have occurred coincidentally and prove the effectiveness of the drugs. In addition, 61% of the public agree that antidepressants are in fact effective and only 6% believe they are not (Monroe 52). Many stories can be found in which antidepressants have helped people overcome their greatly debilitating depression and lead their lives full and able without feeling any effects

of their illness, attesting to the effectiveness of antidepressants. Overall, antidepressants offer “a stable foundation so [people] can make changes” and allow people with depression to feel normal again (Monroe 30). Antidepressants have been used worldwide for decades, long enough to gain recognition as proven drugs to treat depression, therefore evincing their efficiency.

Not only statistics and personal success stories bolster the belief that these drugs are in fact beneficial; scientific and medical reasoning explains the efficiency. “It is clear that antidepressants which focus on altering the neurotransmission of

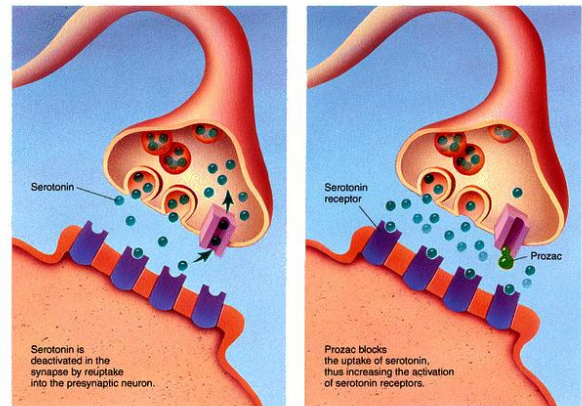
norepinephrine and serotonin are effective in the treatment of depression...the brain functions chemically, and the chemical changes that occur with depression are the same, regardless of the reasons for it” (Boyles par 21). All antidepressants work in a similar way; they change the amount of chemicals in

the brain to relieve depression. Depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain in which the levels of

specific neurotransmitters are low and do not allow the different areas of the brain to communicate effectively. Each type of antidepressant slightly alters specific chemicals in a certain way. For example, SSRIs block the reuptake of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that causes feelings of happiness (D’Amore). MAOIs and TCAs both work by blocking the breakdown of serotonin as well as noradrenaline, a different type of neurotransmitter (Monroe 82). Though there are many critics of antidepressants, the medical reasoning for these drugs to work is overwhelming and should be taken into great consideration when determining the effectiveness of antidepressants.

Supporters of antidepressants argue that many people against using these drugs employ the reasoning of severe adverse results that occur extremely rarely. The source of said “side effects” is unclear. Doctors argue that any medication will have side effects and antidepressants “have been carefully studied and are closely regulated” (Quitkin par 3). Experts claim that these opponents take rare side effects and exaggerate them greatly, causing others to question the drug’s benefits. In addition, doctors declare that the

► Blockade of Serotonin Reuptake by Fluoxetine



The antidepressant Prozac works by increasing the activation of serotonin receptors therefore amplifying the levels of serotonin in a user’s brain, causing a feeling of happiness.

“side effects” may not have been manifested by the drug itself but perhaps by depression. “Ironically, the most worrisome potential side effects of SSRIs—loss of libido and suicidal thinking—are also common symptoms of depression. Another irony is that SSRIs have largely replaced the older tricyclic antidepressants partly because they cannot be used to commit suicide” (“What are the Real Risks” par 21). Many experts warn that the adverse results of antidepressants may not even be caused by the drugs; critics take a symptom seen in a patient and immediately claim it to be a side effect. This argument is especially convincing when taking into account the “side effect” of suicide. “15% of people with unsuccessfully treated clinical depression will commit suicide in their lifetime—Prozac or no Prozac” (Quitkin par 7). Moreover, they state that suicide was just as likely in a patient taking antidepressants and one taking a placebo. “Adolescent suicide rate declined nearly 15% in the U.S. between 1985 and 1999, while the use of SSRIs in that age group was rising nearly 70%” (“What are the Real Risks” par 22). Some even go as far as to say the claim that antidepressants cause suicide is only a “scapegoat” for those critics and suicidal behavior was most likely evident in many patients before taking antidepressants (D’Amore). Whether these points are valid or not, it is evident that all drugs have side effects, some even severe, and it is up to the user and the doctor to determine the frequency and risk of such effects.

A COMPROMISE

To reach a compromise on such a controversial issue, pertinent information must be supplied not only to patients considering taking antidepressants but to the population as a whole. Both the media and doctors must render people aware of the fallacies and myths regarding antidepressants by providing them with accurate information on these drugs and their alternatives. A major part of the problem regarding these medications is that doctors usually do not offer any alternatives to antidepressants due to “simple ignorance and prejudice against herbal medications” (Zuess 62). Patients and doctors alike must be educated about such remedies to ensure the discontinuation of over-medicating; however, they must also be aware of the dangers of such alternatives as well. Programs in which nutrition and exercise are stressed to relieve the side effects of antidepressants and make them more effective also must gain recognition as beneficial to one’s mental and physical health. Most significantly, doctors must first encourage patients to attend therapy to see if their depression can be solved without the use of prescription drugs.

To ensure safe use of antidepressants, only licensed mental health professionals should be able to prescribe the drugs. These doctors have the skill, education, and time to fully evaluate their patients and determine the right treatment for each. Most importantly, patients must develop a strong relationship with their psychiatrist and have mandatory psychotherapy on a regular basis, especially when first beginning an antidepressant. By only allowing specific doctors to prescribe antidepressants, less inaccurate and unneeded use of the medications will occur, ceasing some of the controversy.

Although the FDA has been taking steps to ensure the safety of antidepressant use, such as issuing a Black Box Warning cautioning against “the risk of suicidal thought, hostility, and agitation” on every antidepressant box, firmer regulations must be enforced (“What are the Real Risks” par 20). The FDA must require greater testing before allowing an antidepressant to be available for adolescents and children to lessen the possibility of suicidal behavior. In addition, the FDA must regulate the herbal alternatives more firmly to ease doctors’ and patients’ concerns about such remedies and make them more available to consumers and medical professionals alike.

While many success stories of antidepressants exist, multitudes of critics argue that these drugs and their side effects are extremely detrimental to patients’ health. Much controversy has arisen over the subject, especially through reports of suicidal and violent behavior because of the medications. Supporters claim that antidepressants are exceptionally beneficial while opponents argue that they are unneeded and dangerous. Although a compromise may not be found, it would be advantageous for both sides if certain restrictions were met and the population was educated about these drugs and their alternative.

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