

## THE TRIUMPH OF PHARMACOLOGY

It did not take long for pharmacology to revolutionize psychiatry. Drugs gave doctors a greater sense of efficacy and provided a tool beyond talk therapy. Drugs also produced income and profits. Grants from the pharmaceutical industry provided us with laboratories filled with energetic graduate students and sophisticated instruments. Psychiatry departments, which had always been located in the basements of hospitals, started to move up, both in terms of location and prestige.

One symbol of this change occurred at MMHC, where in the early 1990s the hospital's swimming pool was paved over to make space for a laboratory, and the indoor basketball court was carved up into cubicles for the new medication clinic. For decades doctors and patients had democratically shared the pleasures of splashing in the pool and passing balls down the court. I'd spent hours in the gym with patients back when I was a ward attendant. It was the one place where we all could restore a sense of physical well-being, an island in the midst of the misery we faced every day. Now it had become a place for patients to "get fixed."

The drug revolution that started out with so much promise may in the end have done as much harm as good. The theory that mental illness is caused primarily by chemical imbalances in the brain that can be corrected by specific drugs has become broadly accepted, by the media and the public as well as by the medical profession.<sup>22</sup> In many places drugs have displaced therapy and enabled patients to suppress their problems without addressing the underlying issues. Antidepressants can make all the difference in the world in helping with day-to-day functioning, and if it comes to a choice between taking a sleeping pill and drinking yourself into a stupor every night to get a few hours of sleep, there is no question which is preferable. For people who are exhausted from trying to make it on their own through yoga classes, workout routines, or simply toughing it out, medications often can bring life-saving relief. The SSRIs can be very helpful in making traumatized people less enslaved by their emotions, but they should only be considered adjuncts in their overall treatment.<sup>23</sup>

After conducting numerous studies of medications for PTSD, I have come to realize that psychiatric medications have a serious downside, as they

may deflect attention from dealing with the underlying issues. The brain-disease model takes control over people's fate out of their own hands and puts doctors and insurance companies in charge of fixing their problems.

Over the past three decades psychiatric medications have become a mainstay in our culture, with dubious consequences. Consider the case of antidepressants. If they were indeed as effective as we have been led to believe, depression should by now have become a minor issue in our society. Instead, even as antidepressant use continues to increase, it has not made a dent in hospital admissions for depression. The number of people treated for depression has tripled over the past two decades, and one in ten Americans now take antidepressants.<sup>24</sup>

The new generation of antipsychotics, such as Abilify, Risperdal, Zyprexa, and Seroquel, are the top-selling drugs in the United States. In 2012 the public spent \$1,526,228,000 on Abilify, more than on any other medication. Number three was Cymbalta, an antidepressant that sold well over a billion dollars' worth of pills,<sup>25</sup> even though it has never been shown to be superior to older antidepressants like Prozac, for which much cheaper generics are available. Medicaid, the government health program for the poor, spends more on antipsychotics than on any other class of drugs.<sup>26</sup> In 2008, the most recent year for which complete data are available, it funded \$3.6 billion for antipsychotic medications, up from \$1.65 billion in 1999. The number of people under the age of twenty receiving Medicaid-funded prescriptions for antipsychotic drugs tripled between 1999 and 2008. On November 4, 2013, Johnson & Johnson agreed to pay more than \$2.2 billion in criminal and civil fines to settle accusations that it had improperly promoted the antipsychotic drug Risperdal to older adults, children, and people with developmental disabilities.<sup>27</sup> But nobody is holding the doctors who prescribed them accountable.

Half a million children in the United States currently take antipsychotic drugs. Children from low-income families are four times as likely as privately insured children to receive antipsychotic medicines. These medications often are used to make abused and neglected children more tractable. In 2008 19,045 children age five and under were prescribed antipsychotics through Medicaid.<sup>28</sup> One study, based on Medicaid data in thirteen states, found that 12.4 percent of children in foster care received antipsychotics, compared with 1.4 percent of Medicaid-eligible children in general.<sup>29</sup> These medications make children more manageable and less aggressive, but they also interfere with motivation, play, and curiosity, which are indispensable for maturing into a well-functioning and contributing member of society.

Children who take them are also at risk of becoming morbidly obese and developing diabetes. Meanwhile, drug overdoses involving a combination of psychiatric and pain medications continue to rise.<sup>30</sup>

Because drugs have become so profitable, major medical journals rarely publish studies on nondrug treatments of mental health problems.<sup>31</sup> Practitioners who explore treatments are typically marginalized as “alternative.” Studies of nondrug treatments are rarely funded unless they involve so-called manualized protocols, where patients and therapists go through narrowly prescribed sequences that allow little fine-tuning to individual patients’ needs. Mainstream medicine is firmly committed to a better life through chemistry, and the fact that we can actually change our own physiology and inner equilibrium by means other than drugs is rarely considered.