

The Emperor's new drugs: Exploding the antidepressant myth

by Irving Kirsch

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Sad? Anxious? Depressed? Seeking relief from the pills supplied by a multi-billion dollar market? The author of this book, a clinical psychologist, does not pretend that antidepressants can't help. His argument, however, is that most of your improvement will be due to the placebo effect: benefits brought about from you knowing that you are being treated. His major piece of research assessed 38 clinical trials involving 3,000 patients with depression. A meta-analysis of the data indicated that the drug effect (the difference between the response to the drug and the placebo response) was incredibly small, and this applies to both new and old classes of drugs.

A figure (Figure 1.1, p10) charts patient improvement versus drug use, psychotherapy, placebo and no treatment. On average, only 25 per cent of the benefit of antidepressant treatment was found to be a result of the drug's chemical content; 50 per cent of the improvement was a placebo effect. The professional concern and reassurance of patients' GPs could be more important than the drugs prescribed, particularly if the harmful side effects of the drugs are considered, says the author.

A few pages on the history of placebos introduces the work of Stewart Wolf and Henry Beecher in the 1950s and, nearly 200 years earlier, a Royal Commission investigation into the power of patients' belief in their 'magnetic fluids' in the weird practise of mesmerism. Apparently, the

price, brand and colour of a modern medicine can all influence patient expectations.

The author is cautious about generalisations. Professor Beecher believed that one in every three patients would benefit from taking a placebo; Professor Kirsch warns that responses to placebos have shown great variation according to a host of factors. Some patients have shown an improvement in angina following placebo surgery — a sparse treatment restricted to opening and then immediately sewing! Despite hundreds of studies, there remains no clear connection between placebos and improvement that is equivalent to the well-proven connection between smoking and cancer.

The book presents a short synopsis on how the brain works and why the chemical imbalance theory of depression looks unreasonable. In the past fifty years, no research has established a direct link between depression and a chemical deficiency in the brain's neurotransmitters; even brains that we consider to be 'normal' may interpret events in ways that generate depression. Would you like a small (and hopefully representative) sample of the countless connections in your grey matter to be tested for their normality?

Professor Kirsch's controversial text has upset several groups of professionals. He notes, *inter alia*, studies that have failed to appear in journals because they did not fit orthodox views; a reluctance to publish the negative results of drug trials; the cherry-

picking of studies by drug companies rather than a presentation of all their results; and too much weight given to statistical significance rather than clinical efficacy (i.e. the results have not occurred by chance but deliver negligible improvements in patients' lives).

The author would like to see a shift from using drugs to treat the hopelessness of depression, to other methods such as psychotherapy, physical exercise and self-help books. In his closing pages he advocates social change, concerned that the poor, unemployed and under-educated are more likely to suffer from depression — and also least likely to benefit from drugs or psychotherapy.

Unavoidably, we are in complex territory where particular people discuss and implement changes in lifestyles. Such a venture seems little to do with the science of repeatable experiments, but more about making sense of taken-for-granted behaviour by considering alternatives. Of the hundreds of possible purposeful ways Joe might spend a Sunday afternoon, why does he follow the usual one?

Review written by Neil Richardson, administration assistant, NHS Kirklees, Huddersfield.