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## Book Review

### From Placebo to Panacea: Putting Psychiatric Drugs to the Test

Edited by Seymour Fisher and Roger P. Greenberg. 404 pp. New York, John Wiley, 1997. \$49.95. ISBN 0-471-14848-2

Review by Ruth G. Matarazzo, Ph.D.

This book, written entirely by academic psychologists, is a dose of strong medicine. A critical review of the psychoactive-drug literature, it asserts essentially that there is inadequate scientific information to conclude that psychoactive drugs are substantially more effective than placebos. The editors remind us that the interpretation of any research data is likely to reflect the researcher's bias: in this case, a bias toward biologic treatment, the pharmaceutical industry's financial motives, or both. They say, "We feel it is important to balance this bias by adopting a counterattitude based on a determined skepticism." Their intellectual, scholarly review is difficult to dismiss; yet the reader may feel their conclusions are immoderate.

Part 1 deals with such conceptual issues as the interpretive problems posed by placebo effects and the need for placebo controls. The authors of this section point out that patients' ratings of improvement are often considerably lower than those of the treating therapist. The abrupt cessation of treatment with the drug and the substitution of a placebo are strongly criticized for increasing the likelihood of a relapse and thus strengthening evidence in favor of the drug. The problem of frequent coexisting illness makes it difficult to evaluate the specificity of a drug used for a given diagnostic entity or syndrome.

Robert C. Carson presents a devastating criticism of the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), which he describes as representing a "prescientific stage of development with respect to an attempt to bring taxonomic order to aberrant behavioral phenomena." He further states that "research advance in the field is seriously hampered by its [the DSM-IV's] pervasive influence." Carson decries the emphasis of the DSM-IV on reliability and its failure to deal with the question of its validity or its explanatory and predictive power.

Part 2 deals with the efficacy of psychoactive drugs for adults and part 3 with the efficacy of drugs for children. Part 4 presents an overview and conclusions.

In their discussion of adult depression, Seymour Fisher and Roger P. Greenberg note that short-term, "validated" psychotherapy programs are more likely than antidepressant medication to produce behavioral change that could have protective long-term effects; these programs also avoid the all-too-prevalent side effects of drug treatments. They state that drug-treatment studies have found that the effect of the specific treatment setting and its overall clinical management interact with the efficacy of the drug itself. With regard to lithium for the treatment of bipolar disorder, they conclude:

The history of the research relating to lithium follows a familiar pattern. Once again, there is a cycle of exaggerated initial results (fostered by enthusiasm and rents in the double-blind design); then, increasingly more conservative reports... ; growing disappointment among clinicians... ; and heightened efforts to find alternative treatments.

David Cohen concludes that a large percentage of schizophrenic patients do not respond well to neuroleptic drugs; that social functioning is not improved by these drugs; and that many patients experience such severe side effects that treatment must be discontinued. William G. Danton and David O. Antonuccio underscore the drawbacks of anxiolytic drugs, including sedation, the return of symptoms after cessation of treatment, and the lack of long-term efficacy. They state that behavioral therapies, such as exposure to situations that generate anxiety, produce better and longer-lasting effects, because patients are helped to develop strategies for dealing with their anxieties and are therefore less vulnerable to future problems.

With regard to drugs used to treat children, Rhonda L. Fisher and Seymour Fisher conclude, "It is not an exaggeration to assert that, by and large, the psychopharmacotherapy of the youth segment of the population is scientifically unjustified." Physicians who prescribe "psychotropic drugs for depressive and anxiety symptomatology are doing so without rational support." Their views are somewhat more favorable regarding the amount and quality of research confirming the efficacy of stimulants in treating attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder in children, the relative immediacy of response to treatment, and the relatively low cost.

The book's greatest strengths are its scholarly citation and discussion of a wide body of relevant literature and its willingness not to pull punches. The book's message is shocking and nihilistic regarding drug therapies, but if it makes us reflect on our practices, the authors will have made an important contribution.

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