

# Viewpoint

## Misguided Thinking

### Mental health at a crossroads

By Chuck Areford

“Take your medication!” is probably the most common refrain in today’s mental health field. After all, medication has been the cornerstone of psychiatric treatment for decades, so much so that it is considered unethical to treat many conditions without it. Yet a new book by award-winning journalist Robert Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic*, effectively shows just how misguided this thinking is.

For most of the 30 years I have worked in mental health, I have been alarmed by my observations that most psychiatric treatments seem to produce more harm than good. I started off as a psychiatric orderly and assisted with electro-convulsive therapy, otherwise known as shock treatment. Most of the patients were middle-aged women from the surrounding St. Louis suburbs but no one was immune. A 16-year-old boy was shocked because he was considered “pre-schizophrenic.” An 85-year-old woman had a heart attack during the shock procedure and died hours later.

Shock treatment reduced all to a vegetative state from which most recovered and some even improved. Tragically though, some never recovered and I developed an enduring skepticism of psychiatric treatment.

After obtaining my master’s degree, I went to work in the inner city of Memphis. Here I saw the ravages of not only racism and poverty, but of a mental health system that relied on medications as the primary form of treatment. I worked with clients who had such severe side-effects that they could hardly walk or talk, so tranquilized that they appeared zombie-like. Even so, their humanity and courage shined through and I was convinced that there was a better way.

After moving to Eugene 20 years ago, I stumbled across *Toxic Psychiatry* by Harvard-educated psychiatrist Peter Breggin. Breggin’s well researched book describes how medications and electroshock damage the brain. He convincingly demonstrates that the common belief that mental illnesses are “genetically caused brain diseases” or “chemical imbalances” is simply not supported by research.

Fortunately, Eugene is home to David Oaks, an internationally known psychiatric survivor and activist. With his organization MindFreedom we reached out to other mental health workers and found that while almost all professionals, including the psychiatrists, were compassionate and caring, it was the younger, more idealistic workers who were most willing to question common psychiatric methods.

The tide of history flowed against us, however, with pharmaceutical companies making billions from sales of psychiatric drugs. They pumped money into seductive advertising and sponsored research that was deeply flawed, focusing only on the short term. Our culture was flooded with Prozac, portrayed as a cutting-edge, feel-good pill for almost anyone. A new generation of antipsychotic medications promised to revolutionize the treatment of schizophrenia. These drugs were touted as safer and were increasingly given to children and the elderly. We who spoke out were dismissed as ignorant and my employment was threatened.

But newspaper and research articles suggested that new anti-depressants were no more effective than the old ones, which were barely better than sugar pills. New antipsychotic medications were linked to weight gain, diabetes and cardio-vascular disease. We sounded the alarm after a surge of deaths in Lane County. A few years ago, research showed that mental health clients are dying 25 years earlier than the average person.



*Anatomy of an Epidemic* promises to turn the tide. Pulitzer Prize finalist Robert Whitaker shows in a solid and evidence based manner that while psychiatric medications can lead to marginal improvement in the short term, they tend to make people worse and more chronic over time. Moreover, these medications actually create the chemical imbalances they are said to correct and this makes it very difficult to quit taking them. This is why the number of those disabled by mental illness has tripled in the last two decades. Today's youth face a major hazard from psychiatric drugging.

Whitaker examines historical and cross cultural evidence, long-term studies and brain chemistry to reach his conclusions, which are the same for antidepressant, anti-anxiety and antipsychotic medication. The pieces come together to create an undeniable picture: Psychiatric drugs are not an effective long-term treatment for most people.

Whitaker has credibility because he has no personal ax to grind with psychiatry. He's a reporter who investigated when he saw something that did not add up and he found an immense deception. His book has the sparkle of truth and is essential reading for those concerned about mental health.

We are fighting for the health, safety and happiness of those suffering from emotional problems. Just because we are right does not mean we will win. Whitaker will give a free talk at 7 pm Friday, Aug. 20, the Eugene Hilton.

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