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An Action Needed: Drugs Blight on America

It is almost incomprehensible that just a little over one hundred years ago a simple cut on a foot could lead to an infection that would kill or that a wound received in battle may lead to the amputation of a limb. It is almost as equally unconceivable that up to a little over fifty years ago there was no standard for medical drugs that provided relief from severe forms of mental illness, leaving very little option for those that suffered to live a meaningful life. Without argument the technological advancement of drugs has saved millions of lives over the last one hundred years, provided a more meaningful existence for those who suffer from mental illness, enabled relief from excruciating pain, and generated hope for the prospect of living longer, more meaningful lives. The purpose of this writing will be to show the shocking trends with regards to the consumption of drugs in our society and despite all the advancements that have been made we are facing head-on a very dark time in the drug revolution. Drug use, and for the purpose of this paper drug use will refer to fully sanctioned and legal forms of drug use, has become a scourge on our Society and we have to act now to fully reign in the over prescription of drugs.

What must be given first consideration when talking about our current situation with prescription drugs is where we were medicinally in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. There was not a shortage of medicines that were claimed to make wonderful cures. The sad truth was that the majority of these were no more than sometimes very harmful and other times completely useless solutions pushed by snake-oil salesman. This was a time when a staph infection on the foot could likely lead to a death sentence. A wound in battle would more than likely lead to an amputation of a limb. In the midst of the ranks of snake-oil salesmen and the large amounts of deaths due to bacterial infections a man with the concept of a “magic bullet” to attack infections started his research and ultimately kickstarted the path to medicine as we currently know it. This man was Paul Ehrlich, and his theory was that if you can use dyes to dye only certain parts of cells and leave other’s undyed then you could essentially use this method to attack infection and leave other cells unaffected. This was the “magic bullet” theory! Interestingly enough after over nine-hundred try’s and many years of research, a research assistant discovered that dye compound #606 successfully eradicated Syphilis from rabbits without harming them (Whitaker 40). This drug became known as salvarsan. This sparked an interest from other scientists to look for other “magic bullets” to help address medical problems. Twenty-five years later the Bayer Company created the second magic bullet from a derivative of a coal-tar compound: sulfanilamide, the predecessor of penicillin (Whitaker 41). Soon the theory of magic bullets was being applied in the area of psychiatry and the psychopharmacology revolution was born (Whitaker 54).

Within the last sixty years scientists have identified and increased our knowledge of mental illness, and Pharmaceutical companies have created and designed very effective solutions for people who suffer from these debilitating mental illnesses. The people that suffer from the most severe forms of mental illness are now able to lead exponentially more productive lives compared to those who were carted off to mental wards and forgotten before the psychopharmacology revolution. Pharmaceutical companies have developed vaccines for the most feared of diseases. Just within the last couple of years we have witnessed a cure for Hepatitis C, something that threatened to cripple our health infrastructure in just a few decades. The advancement’s in pain management have allowed for surgical procedures never before imagined; relief from the most excruciating pains fathomable is now possible. It is without a doubt that a lot of focus has been given to the health and welfare of our society which is fairly represented in the amount of money we dedicate to it.

Unfortunately, it seems with every good story there is a bad side of things that always seems to display its ugly head. Some very troubling trends that have resulted from our increased reliance on drugs to solve our medical problems. With the increased and irresponsible use of antibiotics we have seen a rise in the incidence of MRSA. The antibiotic-resistant bacteria that give rise to MRSA annually cause 2 million illnesses and 23,000 deaths in the United States alone; they threaten to return us to that same time a little over 100 years ago when a simple cut on the foot could be fatal (Prevention). It is not a case for not using antibiotics at all but a case for using them responsibly. Not only are antibiotics the most common of drugs used in human medicine they are not needed in up to 50% of the cases they are used for (Prevention). It is possible to heal from alternative medicine such as manuka honey or let the body heal from its natural immune responses. Manuka honey in particular has proven useful on its own against several bacteria including MRSA and is also able to make certain antibiotics more effective when combined in therapy (Dee A. Carter). Interestingly enough honey is not a new concept with regards to treating wounds but an ancient remedy that lost its luster with the introduction of antibiotics. Something has to be done before we make all antibiotics ineffective. Our first action should be to properly prescribe antibiotics and prescribe alternate solutions as first line of defense.

The over prescription of medicine is not limited to antibiotics. Perhaps an even more frightening situation is the over prescription of medicines for mental illness. Picture for a moment the mental illness equivalent of MRSA. A situation where we have over used medicines for mental illness so much that there was no coming back. This is not a far-off concept since the very nature of medicines for mental illness work by breaking the very mechanisms that are responsible for relaying chemical messages throughout our minds. Take for instance that the increase in disabled mentally ill has actually accelerated since Prozac and other second-generation drugs were introduced; the epidemic, by way of medicines such as Ritalin, have brought our children into the mix of this awful plague (Whitaker 5). After Prozac was introduced in 1987 until twenty years later the number of disabled mentally ill children has skyrocketed thirty-five-fold (Whitaker 7). This is a staggering statistic. Drugs for mental illness such as ADHD are prescribed like they are for antibiotics in cases where they are not needed; in cases where parents just want their kid to have an edge in school. Once again there are situations where these drugs are very likely needed, and in fact do wonders, but we have to prescribe responsibly or we risk subjecting our next generations to a life of requiring drugs to resolve mental issues because the mechanisms for which we cope with them are broken beyond repair. Just as our bodies can naturally ward off disease we can naturally handle mental illness. Interestingly enough, third world countries that don’t have the access to drugs for mental illness like the U.S. actually have better resolution rates for mental illness such as schizophrenia and the link has been made to the lack of family support with mental illness in developed nations. Is it possible that love is actually a cure for mental illness? This is very possible since a lot of mental illness is directly blamed on the lack of it! It has been discovered by a Duke Study that exercise is actually more effective at decreasing relapse rates of mental illness then both medicine and exercise groups and medicine only groups (Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences). If more attention is placed towards alternate options such as love and exercise we will discover that once again drugs should not be the front-line defense for mental illness but the last resort option when all else has failed. With this strategy we can certainly help save our minds and become less reliant on drugs to cope with problems we should be able to handle on our own.

Perhaps one of the most current and relevant examples of the repercussions with the overuse of prescriptions is the Opiate Epidemic. As of 10/26/2017 President Trump declared Opiate use a National Emergency. As recently as 2015 92 million Americans were prescribed opioids. This staggering statistic represents 38% of the American population and is enough pills for every American to be medicated around the clock (Heide). With poor prescription practices combined with abuse patterns it is no wonder why we have such a health issue with opioids. Between 1999 and 2015 deaths due to prescription opioids have quadrupled killing more than 183,000 people (Control). The increase in death and hurt is not limited to just overdoses; the prevalence of prescription opioids in fatally injured drivers increased from 1.0% to 7.2%. from 1995 to 2015 (Chihuri and Guohua 1491). Having personally known friends that have fallen into the traps of prescription opiates and seen them die from their inability to adjust, I talk a personal attachment to my call for reigning in these poor prescription practices. Once again, I am not calling for eliminating all opioid prescriptions but more of a call on responsible prescription practices.

It is without a doubt that our Society has benefited from the advancement of drugs. Millions of lives have been saved and millions more have been made more effective. Whether it is the antibiotic that prevents the infection that leads to amputation of limbs, the antipsychotic that allows a previously bed ridden schizophrenia patient to hold a job lead a somewhat normal existence, or the opiate that helps ease the excruciating pain of severe body trauma, drugs have benefited our lives. We must be able to recognize the wolf in sheep’s clothing, however. When we break down the numbers, recognize the trends, and get a true picture of what is really going on, we need to reevaluate our protocols and reign in the over prescription of drugs in our society.

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