

The Write Stuff



In the bookstores... medicines out of control? antidepressants and the conspiracy of goodwill

by Liz Wager

*Charles Medawar and Anita Hardon, Aksant Academic Publishers, The Netherlands.
ISBN 90 5260 134 8. Copies available from www.socialaudit.org.uk*

I started reading this book with the feeling that it was probably something that I ought to read but not expecting to like it. I was afraid it would be a one-sided rant against all that is wicked in the pharmaceutical industry which would leave me feeling both disheartened and irritated. I felt that I ought to read it because I am the first to admit that the behaviour of some drug companies falls far short of perfection, but I expected to be irritated because so many critics misunderstand the workings of drug companies and impute the worst of motives for all their actions. But this book is different.

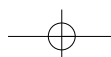
While the subject is not cheering, and the side-effects of antidepressants may not be a revelation to many EMWA members, Medawar and Hardon have a refreshingly balanced approach. Charles Medawar describes himself as a "layman" specialising in "medicines policy and drug safety issues with a particular interest in corporate, governmental and professional accountability" whilst Anita Hardon is Professor in the Anthropology of Care and Health at the University of Amsterdam. Approaching the subject from an anthropological viewpoint instead of seeking to apportion blame, these

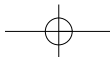
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authors try to understand why individuals and organisations act in the way they do. They also note that "the question mark in this book title is emphatic" and indicates that the book represents "an invitation to make up your own mind".

The book takes the form of an extended case history using the example of antidepressants, in particular fluoxetine (Prozac) and paroxetine (Seroxat), to highlight problems with the regulation and promotion of medicines. The authors central tenet is that everybody wants to believe that new drugs work and that they are safe. This is the "conspiracy" of goodwill of the title. What makes this analysis unusual is the authors' insistence that all players, including patients, regulators and prescribers, are simply swept along by this "conspiracy" rather than manipulated by the drug companies.

Their story starts with the earliest attempts to treat mental illness, noting that "between the 1860s and 1960s, doctors treated mental distress by prescribing alcohol and opium, then morphine, heroin and cocaine. Later came chloral, bromides, barbiturates and many similar drugs. Bar alcohol, each of these drugs was also used to treat addiction – and later found to cause it too." The "historical" evidence, much of which will seem frighteningly bizarre to modern readers, gradually leads into the current story of the selective





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serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Medawar and Hardon never neglect the fact that antidepressants have helped many people, but they also demonstrate how (and why) patients' reports of adverse experiences have been systematically overlooked or underplayed.

The roles of doctors, governments, journal editors and drug companies are all scrutinised, yet the authors avoid demonising anybody and are generous in crediting good behaviour even within a catalogue of weaknesses. The problem with SSRIs, the authors conclude, lies in the complex relationships "between the professional, business and governmental organisations involved – and between individuals and organisations." They offer no simple solutions, but it is refreshing to see the players described as "collaborations of essentially decent, honest, intelligent people".

I urge EMWA members, especially those who write up drug studies for pharmaceutical companies, to read this book. In addition to the thought-provoking analysis of the development and promotion of antidepressants it contains interesting insights about the use of language, especially about the description of adverse events. This book also shows that it is possible to write about complex scientific issues in a highly readable style without sacrificing detail or clarity, and that it is even possible to make the seemingly dull topic of drug regulation enjoyable.

Having expected to be irritated by errors I must admit that I did find a few, and, yes they did annoy me. There is a rather sweeping condemnation of ghost writing which is described in the context of "unsavoury marketing practice," but don't worry, I have already sent the authors a copy of the EMWA guidelines!. There is also a very curious statement that "most journals have no system of peer-review". I hope these annoyances can be corrected in later editions but also believe Medawar and Hardon's message is sufficiently important that EMWA members should not use the weaknesses as an excuse to ignore this thought-provoking work.

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The University of Sciences in Philadelphia is seeking a faculty member for a 12-month appointment to the College of Graduate Studies MS Program in Biomedical Writing as Assistant or Associate Professors, depending on academic achievement and experience. The successful candidate will start on July 1, 2005 and will report to the Director of the MS Program in Biomedical Writing.

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