Rachel Rogers

Ms. Aughenbaugh

English 12

13, March, 2015

Going Overboard with Psychotropic Medication in Children

It is a national epidemic, drug abuse. But not in the way one might think rather it is an overuse of prescriptions for psychotropic medications. Psychotropic medications are at an all time high worldwide, over double what they were just a few years ago. It is not just among adults that this increase has taken place; the use of psychotropic medications has also risen significantly in children and adolescents. With adverse side effects, some leading to death, the overuse of psychotropic medication is too high and too dangerous to be ignored.

“Psychotropic medications are psychiatric medications that alters the chemical levels in the brain which impact mood and behavior” (Enjoli). Some types of psychotropic medications include: antipsychotics, antidepressants, ADHD medications, anti-anxiety, and mood stabilizers. These medications work by affecting neurotransmitters in the brain. These affects can block, stimulate, or cause a diminution. This causes a change in the chemical balance in the brain, either by blocking, increasing, or decreasing certain chemicals that can be causing problems. One of the problems with these medications is that they may affect too much of the brain causing other side effects. Some side effects that can be found in The Psychotherapists Guide to Psychopharmacology: Second edition by M.D. Michael Gitlin. These side effects include: Risk for Diabetes, Risk for Heart Disease, Tremors, Seizures, Sexual Dysfunction, Photosensitivity, Weight Gain. As well as more severe side effects such as Dystonia, Akinesia, Akathisia, Agranulcytosis: a decrease in white blood cells that can put the patient at risk for life-threatening infections. Tardive Dyskinesia: which is potentially irreversible, twitching/grimacing have potential to get worse over time. Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome: Fever and muscle rigidity, mental status changes, and faster pulse. This can be fatal if not treated properly and diagnosed early on. (Gitlin 400-412)

One of the reasons that the use of psychotropic medication has increased is due to the fact that they are being given out for off-label uses. Off label medications are prescribed for conditions that they are not specifically approved for by the government. While against the law for drug makers to promote off label uses, once a medication is on the market doctors can use it for conditions other then what is approved for. In addition, there is evidence that shows that aggressive marketing by drug companies has helped fuel the increase in psychotropic medication. Not to mention in psychiatrics today medication is generally favored over traditional therapy because medication is less expensive, less time consuming, and can often be more effective at combating symptoms and behavioral problems. Insurance companies encourage the use of medication and often will not pay for therapy or stays in psychiatric hospitals unless medication is introduced. In addition psychotropic medications, especially antipsychotics, are more often being prescribed for behavior problems due a reclassification that made them a personality disorder. In an interview with Amy Corderoy, Professor Jureidini said that "There has been a very significant increase in the prescription of antipsychotic drugs and we can be pretty confident there has not been an increase in psychosis." This brings up another point for the increase in psychotropic medication that can be pinned on misdiagnoses. When it comes to the psyche it is often hard to pinpoint exactly what disorder is occurring due to the fact that symptoms can vary patient to patient and there is not an absolute way to determine which is in effect. This often can lead to misdiagnose by doctors, which in turn leads to improperly prescribed medications. Patients, especially those under eighteen, can be severely affected by this because not only will the medication not help but it can cause doctors to continually switch medications causing adverse side effects. It may also cause patients to want to stop taking any medication at all, which can be detrimental to the health of a patient who truly needs medication to function.

In order to elaborate further on the effect companies have the increase of psychotropic medication is Rutgers University Study. This study assists in showing that children are more likely to be placed on medication than into counseling. Rutgers University Study claims "Children from low income were four times more likely to receive antipsychotics when compared to children privately insured" (Wilson). Also, showing the dangers of psychotropic medications the United States Food and Drug Administration provided data reporting at least "forty-five deaths of children from antipsychotic medication" (Elias). As well as some thirteen thousand complaints of side effects, some of which were life threatening. In addition, demonstrating the increase in psychotropic medication is information from Freedom of Information Law showing double in prescription use. The Freedom of Information Law released data saying "Last year there were about 14 antipsychotic prescriptions for every 1000 children compared to 7 in 2007" (Corderoy).

These psychotropic medications can be dangerous, especially to those under eighteen. Many of the most popular medications are meant to be taken by adults and only a few of these medications are approved for anyone under eighteen. Medications such as Risperdal, Zyprexa, Seroquel, and Abilify are not approved for children yet doctors can still prescribe them as an off label medication. Also, despite the rise in prescriptions of psychotropic medication in behavioral problems there is little to no evidence of safety or efficiency in behavior conditions. Dr. Bruce Ferry said "As the actual evidence base would support [such off-label prescriptions of antipsychotics] is scant to non-existent […] one is led to the conclusion that this is another example of irrational prescribing that that can be traced to both the overt and tacit influence of drug companies" (Szalavitz).

Though medication is dangerous and often over prescribed, there are times when it is absolutely necessary. In disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, just to name a few, medication is essential to help a patient be able to function each day. In these cases medications help patients have a better quality of life. Dr. Eric Handler says "In some severely troubled children, a drug like Risperdal can make the difference between going to jail and going to school" (Rather).

In order to demonstrate to the over prescription of psychotropic medications look at the story of Kyle. Kyle was just eighteen months when he started taking medication. He was diagnosed with five different disorders and placed on multiple pills such as Risperdal and Prozac. Kyle's mother, Brandy, began to worry about the effect the drugs had on Kyle's personality. In an interview with New York Times with Wilson, she described what it was like when Kyle was on these medications, "I didn't have my son. It's like you'd look into his eyes and you would just see just blankness." After being weaned off the medications, Kyle is doing much better. Now he is only on one medication, Vyvanse, which is FDA approved for use in adolescents and children with ADHD. He has improved significantly and is doing well in school proving that he should never have been on such powerful medications in the first place.

In order to decrease the excess use of medication in children alternatives should be pushed and medication should be used as an assisting factor for therapy and only be temporary, unless the medication is absolutely required. Philippa Binns brings up a point of advice when considering psychotropic medication, "Doctors who were prescribing antipsychotics and antidepressants to children should be specialists in children's psychiatric problems."(Corderoy) This would help to reduce misdiagnoses and will limit the amount of prescriptions for psychotropic medications. For any parent who has a child struggling with a mental disorder it should be reminded how important a proper diet and exercise is. "Your lifestyle can be a major underlying cause of that chemical imbalance or dysfunction." (Mercola) Important vitamins, such as vitamin D, are essential to maintaining a healthy chemical balance in the brain. Limit Fructose in the child's diet as it has been linked to mental health issues. Reduce the amount of processed foods in the child's diet. Ensure the child drinks plenty of water to stay hydrated. Allow the child to eat foods with good bacteria, found in foods like yogurt. Include organic and whole foods in a child's diet helping with nutrition and reduction of chemical exposure. Reduce the amount of grains given to a child. "Prevent exposure to toxic metals and chemical by replacing personal care products, detergents and household cleaners with all natural varieties." (Mercola) The presence of toxic metals at high measures can interfere with biological functioning. Exercise and outdoor activity can help stimulate the child and calm the brain down. Also, make sure to provide the child with an outlet for their emotions and give them an ability to talk things out. It may seem excessive, but chemical balance in the brain is crucial and can help reduce symptoms brought on from mental disorders. It may not be a cure, but neither is medication in these cases.

In conclusion, the increase of psychotropic medications in children is both dangerous and unnecessary. There needs to be more effort to slow down the growth, reduce aggressive advertising, there needs to be testing to evaluate the effects these medications have on children, a development of less severe medications approved for children, and an advancement on more alternatives. Doctors should be more persistent in explaining how important a good diet and exercise are and how they can help mental disorders. With some work it is possible to reduce the over prescription of these psychotropic medications and improve on the diagnosis of mental disorders. Protecting children from side effects that can permanently affect them should be a higher priority and should not be ignored any longer.

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