Assessing Overmedication: Biology, Philosophy and Common Sense

Acta Biotheoretica, 51, September 2003, pp 151-171

Wim J. van der Steen
This article is 20 pages long and has 90 references

FROM ABSTRACT:

Overmedication is nowadays a serious problem in health care due to influences from the pharmaceutical industry and agencies responsible for regulation.

This situation has indeed become appalling in psychiatry, where both theories and treatments have deteriorated under the impact of the [drug] industry.

The overmedication problem is associated with biased biology in medicine.

Adequate biological approaches would indicate that drug therapies must yield to diet therapies, particularly treatments involving omega-3 fatty acids, in many cases.

To the extent that philosophy of science adapts to mainstream medicine in analysis of the current situation, it may reinforce the existing bias.

To redress imbalances in health care, we ultimately have to rely on common sense.

THIS AUTHOR ALSO NOTES:

“Western culture is nowadays suffering from massive overmedication due to a bias in medical research and medical practice, impacts from the pharmaceutical industry, and policies of authorities in power that privilege the industry.” [Key Point]

This situation particularly exists in the prescribing of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and antacids, and in psychiatry.

“Inappropriate medication that easily takes the form of overmedication is enhanced in medicine and psychiatry by an uncritical reliance on randomized controlled trials as the paradigm of ‘evidence-based medicine.’”

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are valuable as long as their limitations are recognized: [9 studies are referenced criticizing randomized controlled trials]
1) Few studies use “active” placebos with side effects like drugs, which alters the outcomes.
2) “Samples of patients are seldom representative for the target population.” [Like using adults in a drug study that will be used on children; or using young patients to study a cancer drug for a cancer that is usually found in the elderly.]
3) A patient’s knowledge that they are in a study strongly influences the outcome.

“RCTs may not result in the best treatment options.”

“In line with the prominent position of drug treatments, medicine exhibits a biased preference for applies biology with a reductionist flavour: Molecular approaches are common whereas ecological factors affecting health are often disregarded.” [Important]

“Common diets in ‘civilized’ countries do not contain adequate quantities of particular omega-3 fatty acids and this contributes to many chronic diseases and psychiatric disorders.” [Key Point]

The evidence to support this is extensive, involving thousands of articles, spanning more than 50 years of research, and involving many disciplines, including psychiatry, cardiovascular disease, cancers and neurological disorders.

“Studies in evolution confirm that our diet is unnatural as it deviated considerably from ancestors.”

The biochemistry of omega-3 acids has proved that they are crucial for many functions, including immunity. [Important]

“The evidence that omega-3 deficiencies contribute to many disorders is overwhelming. Yet, the evidence keeps being ignored in many areas of medicine and psychiatry. The literature as a whole indicates that drug therapies should yield to diet therapies in many cases.”

For rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune diseases, this author argues against overmedicating with NSAIDs and using antacids for gastric ulcers and other mild stomach complaints and suggests that omega-3 fatty acids offer a better option than the drugs. He notes that the “use of drugs is biased by undue influences from the pharmaceutical industry.” The industry knows about the adverse effects of NSAIDs, yet it has recently flooded the market with the new cox-2 inhibitors [Bextra, Celebrex and Vioxx], which research indicates are as problematic as the older drugs. [This was authored in 2003; Bextra and Vioxx were removed from the market in 2004, and Celebrex was “Black Boxed” warned.]

This author argues that diet therapies outperform NSAIDs in treating autoimmune and other diseases and that NSAIDs cause serious gastrointestinal problems.

“The anti-inflammatory properties of fish oil (with the antioxidant vitamin E added to it) help prevent such [immune and autoimmune] diseases.”

Overmedication is particularly common in psychiatry, and it is appalling. “Psychiatry has steadily deteriorated during the past few decades, while at the same time evolving into one of the most powerful forces shaping our society.”

This author notes that psychiatrists use newer drugs because of aggressive marketing by drug companies and by allying themselves with the most aggressive patient activists and most aggressive patient groups [who are often primarily funded by the same drug companies].

This author does an excellent job of showing the problems with randomized controlled trials (RCTs) while acknowledging that RCTs “are regarded as the most powerful tool of research on treatment effects.” He makes the following points:

1) Prior to the 1960s, drug marketing and use did not require evidence of efficacy and safety.
2) However, after thalidomide caused serious birth defects, drug risks had to be offset by benefits (1962).
3) RCTs had “devastating effects” on psychiatry because they changed the way of looking at evidence, clinical judgment became suspect, and drug companies explicitly recruited patient samples of convenience with no evidence that the results obtained were valid in real-life situations.
4) RCTs lead to a “continual interaction between [drug] companies and regulators that ultimately led to massive overmedication with bad drugs.”

When Prozac was approved by the FDA in 1987, the evidence of its benefit over placebo was weak.

Some drugs for depression licensed by the FDA had minimal effects on depression and in some cases were approved with only 2 of 6 studies showing a superiority over placebo. The other studies were termed “failed trials” and belonged to the drug company that funded it.

The enormous increase of depressive disorders in the 1990s is “directly attributable to intensive marketing of antidepressives (SSRIs) and other drugs by the pharmaceutical industry.” Obsessive Compulsive Disorder increased by a thousand-fold.

“We are also being cheated by the active suppression of evidence. SSRIs can be shown to ‘work’ through the use of clinician-based rating scales. But when patient-based rating scales have been used in trials, the drugs cannot be shown to work, and this information has not seen the light of day.”
RCTs are used by “governments, third-party payers, or drug companies attempting to gain control of a market.” [Very Important]

He notes that evidence-based medicine is actually “evidence-biased medicine.”

In psychiatry, RCTs and evidence-biased medicine have led to “extensive medicalization of ordinary problems of living” and “treatment is now driven by a concern for enforcing behavioural norms.” [WOW!]

Now we have massive medication. “Numerous children with problematic behaviour are forced to take methylphenidate (Ritalin), a drug with a pharmacological profile resembling cocaine. Antidepressants are prescribed in large quantities on the basis of flimsy evidence.”

NSAIDs and antacids are overused on a massive scale, but the problem with psychotrophic drugs is much worse. “The pharmaceutical industry has gained undue power that fosters irresponsible usage of drugs.”

Shortages and imbalances of fatty acids in diets are “responsible or co-responsible for much psychiatric morbidity. Inadequate forms of food processing and unnatural agriculture and husbandry are at the root of this. Evidence is also accumulating that diet therapies may well outperform drug therapies in psychiatry.”

Our diets contain insufficient amounts of EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) omega-3s.

One should have more omega-3s than omega-6s.

“Fish oil is a valuable source of these acids, but we must take care to have the acids combined with antioxidants.” [Very Important]

There is much criticism of antidepressants drugs to treat depression, especially when Harvard research shows “the omega-3 acids are vital for the treatment of depression.”

Fish oil capsules have “positive effects in many diseases and disorders.”

NSAIDs are used in large quantities in autoimmune diseases even though they have serious side effects. NSAIDs “account for more reports of drug related toxicity than any other class of drugs.” NSAIDs “account for more than half of all episodes of ulcer bleeding and perforation.”

Omega-3 fatty acids are a better option than NSAIDs because they have no side effects, they help prevent autoimmune diseases, and they also have curative effects.
Helicobacter pylori bacteria is another causal factor in ulcers. Its’ rate of infection has rapidly increased in the last 100 years because of changes in diet and food production. Treatment of Helicobacter pylori bacteria infection with antibiotics has caused resistance to emerge, making these drugs increasingly useless. Individuals with Helicobacter pylori have impaired immune function, and immunity is boosted with omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fatty acids can help treat Helicobacter pylori infection without potent drugs.

“If we accounted for all the factors that influence disease in some way, then diseases with a single cause would be impossible, and treatments that cause a single effect would also be impossible.”

“If inadequate diets are a cause of the infection, we had better oppose against the natural course of science.”

“Omega-3 fatty acids do not get the attention they deserve in view of promising evidence.”

“Dietary deficiencies cause conditions in the stomach that help Helicobacter pylori thrive there.”

All the fuss over Helicobacter pylori has fostered irresponsible overmedication.

Treating ulcers with antibiotics and antacids has fostered “disastrous overmedication” while the role of omega-3 fatty acids in their pathogenesis had remained outside the scope of analysis.

“My interest has been in overmedication. I do hope that I have fabricated a strong showing that exists to an appalling degree. The wellbeing and lives of many people depend on our being able to depress medication to humane degrees.”

**KEY POINTS FROM DAN MURPHY:**

1) Overmedication is nowadays a serious problem in health care due to influences from the pharmaceutical industry and agencies responsible for regulation.

2) The overmedication problem is associated with biased biology in medicine.

3) Adequate biological approaches indicate that drug therapies must yield to diet therapies, particularly treatments involving omega-3 fatty acids, in many cases.
4) Western culture is suffering from massive overmedication due to a bias in medical research, impacts from the drug companies, and policies of authorities in power that privilege the drug companies.

5) Randomized controlled trials used to produce “evidence-based medicine” have significant limitations, leading to “evidence-biased medicine”. RCTs have lead to an inappropriate interaction between drug companies and regulators, leading to massive overmedication with bad drugs. RCTs are used by “governments, third-party payers, or drug companies attempting to gain control of a market.”

[I question if a group of chiropractors are attempting to “gain control” of our profession through the CCGPP guidelines]

6) In psychiatry, RCTs and evidence-biased medicine have led to extensive medicalization of ordinary problems of living and treatment is now driven by a concern for enforcing behavioral norms.

[This is the central theme of the new book by Ray Moynihan, Selling Sickness: How the World’s Biggest Pharmaceutical Companies are Turning us all into Patients; Nation Books, 2005. NOTE: “The marketing strategies of the world’s biggest drug companies now aggressively target the healthy and the well. The ups and downs of daily life have become mental disorders, common complaints are transformed into frightening conditions, and more and more ordinary people are turned into patients. With promotional campaigns that exploit our deepest fears of death, decay, and disease, the $500 billion pharmaceutical industry is literally changing what it means to be human. Rightly rewarded for saving life and reducing suffering, the global drug giants are no longer content selling medicines only to the ill. Because as Wall Street knows well, there’s a lot of money to be made telling healthy people they’re sick.”]

7) The diets in “civilized” countries do not contain adequate quantities of omega-3 fatty acids and this contributes to many chronic diseases and psychiatric disorders.

8) More than 50 years of research and thousands of studies involving many disciplines, including psychiatry, cardiovascular disease, immunology, cancers and neurological disorders, show that omega-3 fatty acids are critical, preventative and curative.

9) “The evidence that omega-3 deficiencies contribute to many disorders is overwhelming. Yet, the evidence keeps being ignored in many areas of medicine and psychiatry. The literature as a whole indicates that drug therapies should yield to diet therapies in many cases.”

10) The use of drugs in psychiatry, for ulcers, for pain, and for autoimmune diseases is biased by undue influences from the pharmaceutical industry.
11) Psychiatrists use newer drugs because of aggressive marketing by drug companies and by allying themselves with the most aggressive patient activists and most aggressive patient groups. [This is another central theme of the book Selling Sickness by Ray Moynihan.]

12) Ritalin is essentially the same as cocaine.

13) Drug companies have gained undue power that fosters irresponsible usage of drugs.

14) The anti-inflammatory properties of fish oil, with the antioxidant vitamin E added to it, help prevent such immune and autoimmune diseases. [This is one reason I like the fish oil from Nutri-West, as it comes with an adequate amount of vitamin E added to the fish oil. Their phone number is 800-443-3333.]

15) Fish oil is a valuable source of these acids, but we must take care to have the acids combined with antioxidants. [This is why I recommend the fish oil protective antioxidant formula from Nutri-West call Complete Omega-3 Co-Factors, which is specifically designed to protect the fish oils from oxidation. Again, their phone number is 800-443-3333.]

16) Harvard research shows the omega-3 acids are vital for the treatment of depression.

17) NSAIDs account for more reports of drug related toxicity than any other class of drugs.

18) NSAIDs account for more than half of all episodes of ulcer bleeding and perforation.

19) Omega-3 fatty acids are a better option than NSAIDs because they have no side effects, they help prevent autoimmune diseases, and they also have curative effects.

20) Reducing medication will improve the wellbeing and save the lives of many people.