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Book Reviews

Charles Medawar: *Power and Dependence; Social Audit on the Safety of Medicines*. Social Audit, London. ISBN 0-946448-04-3.

This is a remarkable book. A few omissions and inconsistencies aside, this book could be a standard reference work on a far-reaching chapter in the recent history of medicine. Its captivating writing and illustrative quotations (to say nothing of the most revealing sample advertisements) surpass the quality of many standard textbooks. It should be obligatory reading for every medical student and physician if they are finally to understand the "Power and Dependence" to which the prescribing of "rewarding" drugs (and not only those) has been become subjugated. For it is first of all they, indeed only they, who can break this vicious circle by exercising strict self-control of their prescribing of psychotropic drugs. If they could make their prescriptions dependent instead on comprehensive, neutral and up-to-date information on the drugs involved they would attain the ideal; and they would cease to rely on the detailman's soft talk and the misguided opinions of well-rewarded opinion leaders.

What does the book expect to teach the regulatory agencies? Their underpaid and understaffed personnel not uncommonly have to rely on experts the majority of whom also advise industry. The agencies may also have to follow guidance from a government that cannot be expected to be tough on its major taxpayers, i.e. the large corporations. Despite the leniency of governments on alcohol and tobacco, one can hardly consider it intelligent of them to follow what is in effect Roche's proposal, i.e. that tranquilizers render people more peaceful (and thus politically manageable).

The consumer (of psychotropic drugs) to whom the book is mainly targeted, will find his worst suspicions confirmed. But should he not also be reminded how often he may himself have pestered his doctor to get the latest drug which he read about in the tabloids, and how naively he may have believed that he could nullify not only the effects of his own excesses but all the daily problems of life with a pill which is so readily to hand? And, if he wants safer drugs, should he not be willing to participate in independent post-marketing studies to recognize new risks (as well as new indications) long before they are discovered by chance? As with smoking, alas, the prevailing attitude may be very firmly entrenched: "so long as the consequences don't affect me ..."

This is indeed a remarkable, but blue-eyed book. I doubt that a supersaturated society, which can afford to pay for every fad, will so readily find its way back to a rational relationship to rational drugs.

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