



A Critical Curriculum on Psychotropic Medications




Case Studies: Medicalization



Disorders Made to Order
Pharmaceutical companies have come up with a new strategy to market their drugs: First go out and find a new mental illness, then push the pills to consumers.


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The Medicalization of Worry: A Case Study for GAD

- The “disease” was generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), a condition that, according to a 1989 study, was only diagnosed in 1.2% of adults
- On April 16, 2001, the FDA had approved the antidepressant Paxil, made by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), for generalized anxiety disorder
- If GSK hoped to capitalize on Paxil’s new indication, it would have to raise GAD’s profile


(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Worry: A Case Study for GAD

- GSK rolled out testimony from GAD “sufferers”, in pre-packaged “video news releases” (VNRs) distributed to TV stations around the country and passed as original health news
- GSK also funded a “patient group” called Freedom From Fear, which released a telephone survey according to which “people with GAD spend nearly 40 hours per week worrying”

(Mother Jones, 2002)




The Medicalization of Worry: A Case Study for GAD

GSK’s strategy of marketing a disease rather than selling a drug works as follows:

- Companies fund studies that prove the drug’s efficacy in treating the affliction, a necessary step in obtaining FDA approval for a new use, or “indication”
- PR companies release dramatic statistics drawn from corporate-sponsored studies and launch the “awareness campaigns”
- Patient groups (funded by the pharmaceutical and often operating out of the PR agency office) are recruited to serve as the “public face” for the condition

(Mother Jones, 2002)




The Medicalization of Worry: A Case Study for GAD

- The strategy enabled the pharmaceutical industry to squeeze billions in additional revenue from selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)
- Approved for depression, SSRIs are now prescribed for a wide array of afflictions that were once virtually unknown: GAD, social anxiety disorder (SAD), premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PDD), among them

Many of these new “disorders” did not previously exist in the DSM

(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Worry: A Case Study for GAD

- Critics note that the DSM process has no formal safeguards to prevent researchers with drug-company ties from participating in decisions of interest to their sponsors.
- The committee that recommended the GAD entry in 1980, for example, was headed by Robert L. Spitzer of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, which has been a leading recipient of industry grants to research drug treatments for anxiety disorders

(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Shyness: SAD

- GSK was first involved in marketing two fairly well-known anxiety disorders: panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- In an effort to expand approval to market Paxil for something called “social phobia” or “social anxiety disorder” (SAD), a debilitating form of shyness the DSM characterized as “extremely rare” it cranked up its PR machinery to “position social anxiety disorder as a severe condition”

(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Shyness: SAD

- Posters carrying the slogan, “Imagine Being Allergic to People,” appeared nationwide
- The firm also created a VNR, a radio news release, and bylined articles that newspapers often run unedited
 - Press information stated that SAD affected 1 in 8 Americans, and was almost as common as depression and alcoholism
 - By contrast, the DSM cited studies showing that only 2 percent of the 3-13% of people diagnosed with SAD “experience enough impairment or distress to warrant a diagnosis of social phobia”

(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Shyness: SAD

- In the two years preceding Paxil's approval, fewer than 50 stories on social anxiety disorder had appeared in the popular press
- In May 1999, the month when the FDA handed down its decision, hundreds of stories about the illness appeared in U.S. publications and television news programs, including The New York Times, Vogue, and Good Morning America
 - By the end of 2001, Paxil had supplanted Zoloft as the nation's number-two SSRI, and its sales were virtually on par with those of #1 Prozac

(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Distress: PTSD

- The lessons of Paxil's success were not lost on Zoloft's manufacturer, Pfizer, which gained FDA approval to market Zoloft as a treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1999
- The company funded the creation of the PTSD Alliance, a group that is staffed by employees of Pfizer's PR firm and operated out of the firm's offices



The Medicalization of Distress: PTSD

- In the months following the launch of Pfizer's campaign, media mentions of PTSD skyrocketed, as did sales of Zoloft
- Stories highlighted studies funded and promoted by the alliance according to which 1 in 13 Americans will suffer from PTSD in their lives, and that it affects those who have witnessed, not just experienced, a scary event

(Mother Jones, 2002)



The Medicalization of Distress: PTSD

The September 11 terrorist attacks allowed these pharmaceutical companies to capitalize on the nation's fears:

- During the month following the September 11 attacks, Pfizer spent \$5.6 million advertising the benefits of Zoloft in treating PTSD-- 25 percent more than it had spent, on average, from January to June
- GSK spent \$16 million promoting Paxil in October 2001-- more than it had spent in the first six months of the year combined

(Mother Jones, 2002)



A Critical Curriculum on Psychotropic Medications

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