

Ritalin – the Cost

The Ecologist turned its attention to the cost of Ritalin in November¹ reporting that a BMA study has concluded that as many as one in ten children and young people have been diagnosed as suffering from serious health problems with 345 thousand young people (3 to 4%) aged 6 to 16 diagnosed as suffering from ADHD. Other sources put the figure rather higher, the *BBC* reports² for example that it could be as high as 5%. Whichever figure you pick it amounts to more than one child in every classroom. This rise in the USA is from only 4,000 prescriptions in 1994 to around 4 million children taking these drugs today, a 2,000% increase in just 15 years³.

The cost of this in the UK is enormous. The treatment for ADHD is usually one of the three methylphenidate drugs (Ritalin, Concerta or Equasym) for which nearly 362 thousand prescriptions were written during 2005-6, despite them only being recommended for use with young people aged 16 and over.

Including diagnosis and follow up visits, treatment costs around £1,000 every year. Families can be eligible for disability living allowance, carer's allowance and disabled child tax credits, worth over £10,000 bringing the total cost to as high as £11,000 per year.

In the USA Ritalin was linked to 51 deaths since 1991 and now carries a "black box" health warning that there have been no long term studies of the use of these drugs with young people. According to Dr Steven Nissen, President of the American College of Cardiologists, the risks include tics, strokes, and, in severe cases, death.

Many drugs routinely used with children remain untested on children. A House of Lords report last summer said that 90% of drugs used on newborn babies and 50% of those used on children are untested. These findings have led to a European regulation on paediatric medicines requiring companies to test drugs on children.

Dr Bob Jacobs, a US psychologist and lawyer who believes that the need for treatment is manufactured by governments and drug companies and even teachers and parents, says, "Drugs ensure the conformism that Western society demands. They have no therapeutic or medical purpose; they simply turn children into zombies." He goes on to say, "Public consciousness is offended by seeing a child in physical restraints, but because chemical restraints are internal they are a much less 'sexy' issue, even though they are arguably even more destructive. Society is based on people dressing, looking and thinking alike. If a child has high energy levels or is extremely creative, he represents a threat: he has to be groomed, trained – or drugged – to comply and conform."

Furthermore there is growing evidence that the constant round of testing is stressing children. Dr Sutton, consultant in child and family psychiatry at the Department of Child Psychiatry at the Winnicott Centre, believes that the national curriculum, SATs, exams and school league tables all contrive to increase children's stress levels. In addition, the pressure on educational establishments and nurseries to perform is pushing the professionals who work in them to initiate diagnoses to get further funding and "treatment" to force conformity among their charges. At the heart of the National Curricula is the idea of conformity which suppresses and pathologises creativity and difference.

The process of homogenisation begins at nursery where children as young as 3 are often expected to sit still and listen to stories for protracted periods. If they refuse their "inappropriate" behaviour can be diagnosed as pathological and requiring treatment. Effectively "inappropriate" means inconvenient.

The *BBC* report says "Some parents have told the *BBC* they were told to give their children medication or keep them at home, and that they often felt they were being denied a proper education." The *BBC's Five Live Report* spoke to one parent who said he was asked by their school to either put the child on medication or face exclusion.

The Ecologist article alleges that the main UK support group for ADHD, the National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service (ADDISS), a Department of Health-funded charity set up 'to provide people-friendly information and resources about ADHD' has solicited and received around £20,000 in funding from Janssen-Cilag, UCB Pharma and Eli Lilly, three of the major pharmaceutical companies that make methylphenidate and other ADHD medications

ADDISS's website provides a fact-sheet for drugs that can be supplied to children. This financing is not acknowledged on the site and nor are their names on the accounts lodged with the Charity Commission. Novartis, who make Ritalin, have a section on their website devoted to teachers offering advice on controlling pupils' behaviour, reminding them of their vital role in their student's treatment programme.

Lawrence Diller³, who practices behavioural-developmental paediatrics in the USA and author of *The Last Normal Child*, is also concerned, Despite having himself diagnosed and treated ADHD with Ritalin for over 25 years he now suggests that there is another way.

"Perhaps, the primary reform we should undertake as a society is to breathe a "collective sigh" about our kids. Things will likely turn out well for most of the offspring of the middle-class families who bring their kids to the doctor's office for evaluation."

He concludes by addressing his professional colleagues,

"You, who have achieved the pinnacle of power and expertise within the community to evaluate and treat children for these problems, are spending way too much time in your offices "diagnosing" disorders and dispensing pills. Instead you should be going out to the schools to attend individualized educational plan meetings, to coordinate an effective behavioural educational plan between the school and parents. Over and over, parents tell me the single most valuable effort I made in helping their child was the 45 minutes I spent with them at such a school meeting. I know there's a core group of kids that - no matter what you do for them - will need these medications, but I think this group is about one-tenth of the number we treat now."

1 www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=621

2 news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6071216.stm

3 sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/11/19/INGT9MCJHF1.DTL