

Psychotropic Drugs to Control the Minds of Children

"Children who display excessive energy and who don't pay enough attention to adults should be dosed with potentially harmful drugs that are intended to overcome their free wills, bringing them under control", such was concluded by the American Medical Association.

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By promoting the diagnosis of ADHD and the use of methylphenidate [Ritalin] as a treatment, the AMA Council on Scientific Affairs' report [1] does a disservice. The council report fails to cite any of the dozens of critical publications spanning decades. [2-6] It exaggerates the benefits of methylphenidate, claiming short-term use improves academic performance. Reviews instead conclude that methylphenidate has no positive effects on learning but can impair it. [3] While admitting there are no proven long-term benefits, the AMA report supports the long-term use of the drug. The report ignores methylphenidate's many adverse effects.

The council report calls ADHD a "neuropsychiatric disorder," but it is a diagnosis of exclusion made only in the absence of any known medical or neurological cause. All the "symptoms" are drawn from normal childhood behaviors, such as squirming in a chair, acting bored, talking out of turn, and being forgetful and inattentive. When these behaviors increase in number or intensity, it really signals that the child requires more individualized attention to unmet basic needs, such as a more engaging and individualized educational environment, more rational or consistent discipline in the home or school, unconditional love, or security and safety. An increase in ADHD-like behaviors almost always indicates that we, as adults, are not giving the child much-needed attention.

The council report specifically denies that methylphenidate is used for behavioral control but the diagnostic items are entirely limited to behaviors. The drug is almost always given to suppress behaviors that signal unmet needs in the child or conflicts between the child and adults. The council report minimizes how widely methylphenidate is being used and abused. By contrast, the International Narcotics Control Board [5] and the Drug Enforcement Administration [4] warn that 90% of the world's methylphenidate is consumed in the United States, that 10% to 12% of boys aged 6 to 14 years are being diagnosed and given methylphenidate, that more high school seniors are abusing the drug than receiving it through physicians, and that methylphenidate is one of the nation's most commonly stolen and diverted substances.

More than three-quarters of a million children could be given drugs to control their behaviour - against their wishes and those of their parents. The spectre is raised by legislation planned by the Government to give more powers to psychiatrists.

Mental health workers are warning that the new legislation is being drawn so widely that doctors will be given the right to drug children just because they have a difficulty with maths or spelling.

The concern over the legislation follows alarming evidence that tens of thousands of schoolchildren with mild behaviour problems are being drugged with Ritalin - dubbed the 'chemical cosh' or 'kiddie crack' - simply in order to control them.

In England, the number of prescriptions for the mind-drug Ritalin - which is given to so-called 'hyperactive' children to improve concentration - has shot up from just 3,500 in 1993 to 126,500 in 1998.

The UK is rapidly following in the path of the US, where a report last week showed that three million children - one in every 30 - are now being given Ritalin. Children as young as two are being given mood-altering drugs, including anti-depressants.

The new legislation will give far greater powers to psy chiatrists to give compulsory treatment in the community to both adults and children. A Green Paper on reform of the Mental Health Act proposes that doctors will be able to drug people, including child-ren, if they have 'any disability or disorder of the mind or brain, whether permanent or temporary, which results in an impairment of disturbance of mental functioning'.

A spokeswoman for the charity Young Minds said: 'Around 10 per cent of children have a diagnosable mental disorder. This is drawn so widely that it could cover a lot of children who have a learning disability. The implication for kids is considerable.'

Under the present legislation, people can only be given treatment against their will if they show 'seriously irresponsible or abnormally aggressive behaviour'. However, the reformed legislation would do away with that safeguard.

Margaret Pedler, head of policy development at the mental health charity Mind, said: 'The new Act gives compulsory powers in the community even for children. The definition is far too wide and could catch all sort of people who shouldn't be given compulsory treatment. It is a great concern.'

The Government has followed the advice of an expert committee, chaired by Professor Geneva Richardson. But Dinah Morley, professional services manager of Young Minds, said: 'It's not impossible it could be used very widely on children against their wishes.'

The drug is usually prescribed for children suffering from the highly controversial medical condition called Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), even though there is no agreement on what causes it, or even whether it really exists.

Two years ago Dr Edward Hamlyn, a founding member of the Royal College of General Practitioners, described ADHD as 'a fraud intended to justify starting these children on a life of drug addiction'. Many medical experts believe that attention deficit or hyperactivity can simply be the result of glandular disorders, nutritional problems or even just tiredness, and so no mind-altering drugs such as Ritalin are required.

The Green Paper, 'Reform of the Mental Health Act', is out for consultation until the end of March. Brian Daniels of the Citizen's Commission on Human Rights, a religious lobby group, said: 'The implications of the Green Paper as it stands are tantamount to social control. Well-meaning parents, teachers and

politicians are being duped that "normal" childhood behaviour is no longer normal and that it is mental illness.'

Mind Control has been a fact for many years. It is simply schandalous to force children taking harmful drugs.