

Abusing prescription stimulants as “cognitive enhancers” is dangerous

I am writing in reaction to an article in *The Columbus Dispatch* on December 8th entitled, “Brain drugs for healthy backed” (p. A10). The article referred to a commentary published online in *Nature* (“Towards responsible use of cognitive-enhancing drugs by the healthy” – December 7, 2008), which seeks to elevate the debate about the merits of using “cognitive enhancers” such as prescription stimulants (e.g., Ritalin and Adderall). It suggests that we reject the assumption that such enhancement is inappropriate *per se* and contends that, “We should welcome new methods of improving brain function.”

This piece has the potential to fuel an already dangerous trend in the abuse of prescription medications. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the abuse of prescription stimulants, painkillers and sedatives/tranquilizers now exceeds that for all illicit “street” drugs combined except marijuana. And new initiates to the abuse of prescription painkillers now exceed those for marijuana. These data indicate that prescription medications are becoming the drugs of abuse of choice in our country. America’s biggest drug problem is not on the streets, it’s in our medicine cabinets!

On our college campuses, the abuse of prescription stimulants is of particular concern. Concerns include the fact that possession of these “controlled substances” without a prescription is a felony, there could be significant health consequences for those using such drugs without appropriate medical supervision, students could develop dependencies on these substances, those providing prescription medications to others outside of medical regimen risk liability in case of adverse drug events, and the use of cognitive enhancers may interfere with the development of habits and behaviors which engender sound personal and professional characteristics/abilities.

Meika Loe, in an article entitled “The Prescription of a New Generation” (*Contexts*, v.7/n.2, 2008) contends that college students may be “pharming to get by.” They misuse prescription stimulants to “become smart and studious on demand.” The suggestion that we accept, and perhaps encourage, the use of prescription stimulants as cognitive enhancers lends false credence to this phenomenon, and it is yet another symptom of the pharmaceuticalization of our society that has led “Generation Rx” to medicate at unprecedented rates. We have come to expect quick fixes for our health (or performance) concerns through medicating, medications have become a pervasive and casual part of our culture, and we are sometimes suffering for these behaviors via adverse drug events and, in this case, potential drug abuse.

Instead of advocating the illegal and dangerous misuse of prescription drugs as cognitive enhancers, we should be encouraging behaviors such as disciplined study, good time management, and sustained academic effort among our students. These behaviors will not cultivate dependencies or adverse drug events, and they are much more likely to lead to long-term personal and professional success.

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