

Psychiatry's [British] Gadfly

Dr. David Healy, a psychiatrist at the University of Cardiff and a vocal critic of his profession's overselling of psychiatric drugs, has achieved a rare kind of scientific celebrity: he is internationally known as both a scholar and a pariah. In 1997 he established himself as a leading historian of modern psychiatry with the book "The Antidepressant Era."

excerpts from **A Self-Effacing Scholar Is Psychiatry's Gadfly**
by **Benedict Carey** in **New York Times** 15 Nov 2005 *Science* section

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(article continues)... In 1997 he established himself as a leading historian of modern psychiatry with the book "The Antidepressant Era." Around the same time, he became more prominent for insisting in news media interviews and scientific papers that antidepressants could increase the risk of suicide, an unpopular position among his psychiatric colleagues, most of whom denied any link. By 2004, British and American drug regulators, responding in part to Dr. Healy and other critics, issued strong warnings that the drugs could cause suicidal thinking and behavior in some children and adolescents.

But Dr. Healy went still further, accusing academic psychiatry of being complicit, wittingly or not, with the pharmaceutical industry in portraying many drugs as more effective and safer than the data showed.

He regularly gets invitations to lecture around the world. But virtually none of his colleagues publicly take his side, at least not in North America...

Because of his controversial views, Dr. Healy has lost at least one job opportunity, at the University of Toronto in 2001. In some circles, his name has become so radioactive that it shuts down discussion altogether.

"People have called it the Healy effect," said Dr. Jane Garland, chief of the Mood and Anxiety Disorders Clinic at British Columbia Children's Hospital in Vancouver, who shares some of Dr. Healy's concerns about drug risks. "If you even raise the same issues he does, you're classified as being with David Healy and that makes people very reluctant to talk. He has become very isolated."

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In a pretrial hearing several years ago, for a suit against Pfizer, maker of the antidepressant Zoloft, Dr. John Davis, a psychiatrist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, took issue with Dr. Healy's testimony.

"The lawyers on both sides were very skillful, very smart," Dr. Davis said, "but in the middle of my presentation - it wasn't a court trial, but a hearing - Dr. Healy got so incensed he got up, edged the plaintiff's lawyer out of the way and cross-examined me himself." Dr. Healy, he said, "couldn't sit there and let someone else do it; he wanted to come for me directly." But Dr. Davis, who does not himself accept drug company money, said he still respected Dr. Healy as a researcher.

Betrayals - small and large - seem to fuel Dr. Healy's sense of mission. In New York several years ago, while poring through Pfizer documents, he found a handwritten note that described a conversation

between a drug company employee and an old friend and colleague. Its subject was "the Healy problem."

Dr. Healy froze, he recalled. He had gone to school with this psychiatrist, had known him for 20 years. When he called his friend to ask about the note, he said, the other psychiatrist shrugged it off.

Through freedom of information requests and other methods, Dr. Healy has hoarded a variety of e-mail messages and other correspondence on "the Healy problem." He hands out copies at talks as evidence of a whisper campaign that he said started in the late 1990's, after he testified on behalf of plaintiffs suing Eli Lilly, maker of Prozac.

"After that I was no longer invited to speak at professional association events, and I started seeing these things written about me," he said... And there were accusations that his legal consulting fees, which he says have been about \$40,000 a year since 1997, were affecting his scientific judgment.

"Fees for an expert witness cannot be made contingent on the outcome of a case, but Healy is a repeat player in these legal actions, and future opportunities depend on past performance and a credible, predictable testimony," Dr. James Coyne of the University of Pennsylvania wrote in a recent article in *The American Journal of Bioethics*: "Lessons in Conflict of Interest: The Construction of the Martyrdom of David Healy and the Dilemma of Bioethics."

Dr. Healy bristles at this criticism and says that his views, which he aired in scientific papers before consulting with lawyers, have cost him more in lost salary than he has earned as an expert witness. In about 9 of 10 cases he evaluated, he said, he concluded that the drug did not contribute to violent behavior...

It was the reaction of two of his patients to Prozac in the early 1990's, Dr. Healy has written, that led him to question its safety. In 1990, Harvard researchers had reported several cases of suicidal thinking in patients on the drugs. But an analysis by the Food and Drug Administration found no evidence of increased risk, and psychiatrists largely ignored advocates who insisted the risk was real.

After completing his own analysis, Dr. Healy came to agree with the critics, and he wrote letters to British drug regulators urging them to review the data related to suicide. By 2003, the BBC had reported on his objections; GlaxoSmithKline, the maker of Paxil, had come forward with unpublished data showing an increase in irritability and suicidal thinking in some minors on the drug; and British regulators began investigating the entire class of drugs...

The American Psychiatric Association publicly took issue with the new warnings on suicide risk. And many psychiatrists said publicly that denouncing the drugs would drive away people who needed them.

Dr. Healy held his ground. He had, his friends and colleagues say, absolute confidence that he knew the topic as well as anyone.

He concedes that no one knows what effect the F.D.A. warning will have. But this uncertainty, he says, is all the more reason that medical journals, professional groups like the psychiatric association, and drug regulators should make raw data from clinical trials public. "It wouldn't take much to bring a change. People don't realize the power they have," Dr. Healy said.

As for Dr. Healy himself, he says he will continue to write and practice, traveling to lecture several times a year. He will also continue to follow his own scientific instincts, regardless of whom he offends. A new book, written with Dr. Shorter, is likely to alienate psychiatry's critics by defending

one of psychiatry's most controversial treatments, electroshock therapy. (full article (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/15/science/15prof.html>))