Parents Worry About Prescription Drugs, Too

by Phyllis Schlafly December 6, 2006

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Meth and marijuana aren't the only drugs parents worry about. The problems caused by prescription combinations called "drug cocktails" have finally broken into the national news stream.

The front page of the New York Times just described Stephen, age 15, who takes antidepressants Zoloft and Desyrel, plus anticonvulsant Lamictal to moderate his moods, plus the stimulant Focalin XR to improve concentration. His brother Jacob, age 14, takes Focalin XR for concentration, plus the anticonvulsant Depakote to moderate his moods, plus the antipsychotic Risperdal to reduce anger, plus Catapres to induce sleep.

Over the last three years, each boy has been prescribed 28 different psychiatric drugs and has seen 11 psychiatrists. Gone are the days when a visit to a psychiatrist meant lying on a couch to recite your troubles. Treatment today means taking prescription drugs, lots of them.

More than 3 million children are using the most commonly prescribed drug, Ritalin, and it is routinely combined with other drugs. Last year, 1.6 million children and teenagers were given at least two psychiatric drugs in combination, and 500,000 were given at least three.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires manufacturers to prove the safety of each drug. But hardly any studies have examined the safety or effectiveness of drugs used in combination.

The American Journal of Psychiatry in 2003 found only six controlled trials of two-drug combinations, four of which failed to show any benefit, and a fifth showed bad side effects. Scientific studies of combinations of three or more drugs are nonexistent.

There are no studies showing long-term safety of psychiatric drugs used on children or the effect on children's developing brains and bodies. The vast majority of these drugs are not FDA-approved for use in children, but they are prescribed for children nevertheless.

Two of the three classes of these drugs are under the FDA's stringent warnings for suicide and violence. They also interfere with learning, causing violence, neurological problems, diabetes, and heart attacks.

Ritalin is prescribed to address what is called Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a disorder first defined only in 1980. The pediatric guidelines for diagnosing ADHD are all subjective, such as, child often has difficulty awaiting his turn, occasionally may do things compulsively, easily distracted from tasks, fails to give close attention to details, and makes careless mistakes.

A few years later, ADHD was classified as a disability and a federal cash incentive program was initiated for low-income families with children who are said to have ADHD. A family could get $450 a month for each child diagnosed with ADHD, with the cost of treatment and medication for low-income children covered by Medicaid.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), passed in 1990, mandates that "eligible children receive access to special education and related services." The school is required to craft an Individualized Education Plan to accommodate each child, which may include drugs prescribed by a medical doctor.

The U.S. Department of Education classified ADHD as a handicap, and in 1991 schools began receiving education grants of $400 a year for each ADHD child.

Since labeling kids ADHD brings more money to the schools, it's not surprising that schools often pressure parents to get an ADHD diagnosis and put their child on Ritalin. School have also found it useful to deal with behavioral and discipline problems by giving boys a drug to get them to sit down, shut up, and do what they're told.

The Food and Drug Administration reported on February 8 that 25 people died (including 19 children) and 54 suffered serious cardiovascular problems after taking drugs prescribed to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) between 1999 and 2003. An FDA advisory panel finally voted in favor of requiring the famous "black box" warning on these drugs.

Instead of dealing with the over-prescription of drug cocktails for children, our government is telling us we have a mental health crisis, and the remedy is universal mental health screening. A major government campaign is now underway, sweetened with federal grants, to subject all children to mental health screening.

The screening usually means having the child fill out a survey about his own behavior. If his answers don't comport with what the so-called experts want, the kid can be referred for treatment, and treatment usually includes medication.

It's up to parents to stop this unscientific, ineffective, and dangerous government intrusion into the minds and values of our children. State laws should require

parental consent for all mental health screening, and Congress should pass the Child Medication Safety Act, to prohibit schools from denying entry to a child whose parents choose not to put him on drugs.