Uppers with a downside

Do anti-depressant drugs increase misery? asks Anthony Daniels

There are more mood-elevating drugs available, both licit and illicit, to assuage our misery than ever before, but it cannot really be said that mankind as a whole is happier now than at any time in its history. There is more *joie de vivre* to be seen in a canvas by Bruegel than in a British high street on a Saturday morning. The truth is that misery is hydra-headed and, for every sorrow ended, 10 spring up in its place.

Dr Healy, a psychiatrist practising in North Wales, has written a subtle and illuminating history of the discovery of anti-depressant drugs. This may seem to the general reader to be a somewhat obscure subject, and indeed at times the book will require close reading by those previously unacquainted with the field. But studies of obscure subject matter can sometimes tell us a great deal about the wider world. Dr Healy's book most definitely does this, and so it amply repays the trouble of reading it.

Most people suppose that anti-depressants are the antibiotics of the mind, somehow correcting the chemical error in the brain which causes people to feel miserable for prolonged periods. Their discovery, it is thought, was to depression what the discovery of penicillin was to pneumococcal pneumonia. Now it has even been suggested, and has come popularly to be believed, that at least one drug, Prozac, holds the key to human happiness and fulfilment.

No one who reads Dr Healy's book will retain these illusions for long. The analogy between pneumonia and depression is a false one; for while pneumonia is a brute fact of nature, depression is a much more ambiguous, fluid and vague concept, easily manipulated to suit the purposes of various interest groups — doctors, psychologists and the pharmaceutical industry.

For example, one of the scales most frequently used to measure depression, the Hamilton Rating scale, contains precisely those symptoms which the first anti-depressant, imipramine, treated effectively. It is almost as if a response to a drug had

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   Week's estimated sales: 10,748.

   5,477.

3. Other People's Children, Joanna Trollope (Bloomsbury, £16.99).
   4,470.

   3,474.