

Sunday Telegraph

Review

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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

The Anti-Depressant Era

by David Healy

Harvard UP, £26.50, 317 pp

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unique in this regard, the number of depressives has risen astronomically, despite — or is it because of? — supposedly effective treatments for depression. It is almost as if rumours of treatment for misery had created the very misery to be treated. Indeed, one eminent psychiatrist, Dr Colin Brewer, has put forward a law of immiseration: misery increases to meet the means available for its alleviation.

Dr Healy is no Luddite: he does not believe in a prelapsarian world of happiness before the anti-depressants were discovered. But his book illustrates the contested nature of progress in psychiatry and the contorted way in which such "progress" (which the late Professor Michael Shepherd, one of the principal figures in this story, preferred to call *activity*) comes about.

All in all, this book is a subtle but deadly assault on the "magic bullet" approach to psychiatric and psychological problems. Dr Kelly lays bare the crudity of the biochemical speculations upon which this approach is based, which owes more to a combination of wishful thinking and the commercial interests of pharmaceutical companies than to genuine scientific endeavour.

His book should be given to every literate person who believes that he harbours a biochemical imbalance in his brain which causes him to behave badly.

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1 **Meals in Minutes**, Ainsley Harriott (BBC, £14.99).
Week's estimated sales: 10,748.

2 **Thrill!**, Jackie Collins (Macmillan, £16.99).
5,477.

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

4 **About a Boy**, Nick Hornby