

Rapidly cycling towards a new psychiatric era

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Wherever one looks in nature, one sees rhythms. Day follows night, the seasons come and go, the tides rise and fall. Even the universe may be cycling in an everlasting repetition of big bang, expansion, collapse, big crunch, and so on into infinity.

Little wonder then that the relatively insignificant recent addition to the universe - mankind - is also dominated by rhythms, or biorhythms in our case. Bipolar oscillations seem the natural order of things, and in the case of mood swings have been described since antiquity.

Much energy is now devoted to trying to control the more extreme instances of bipolar "disease", including the form where the mood swings are very frequent, known as rapid cycling. But one is entitled to wonder what psychiatrists of 50 years hence will make of these efforts. To predict the future without a crystal ball is not easy, but history too goes in cycles, so maybe if we extrapolate from current trends, we can see where the swing of the pendulum will take us by the time our grandchildren are grown up.

Currently psychiatry is dominated by the biological approach, partly as a result of the success of the neurosciences and partly as a reaction against the dominance of psycho-analysis which revolutionised thinking last century, only to freeze progress like a religious faith. The biological approach basically means physical treatments for mental symptoms, mainly synthetic drugs. But readers familiar with Le Chatelier's principle in chemistry will know that every change gives rise to forces opposing that change. Or as the physicist would say, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Swings and mood swings: the story of lithium

A good example of swings and roundabouts is the story of the drug lithium. This mainstay of the treatment of severe mood swings has itself swung wildly in the opinion polls. Hailed as a wonder drug when it calmed manic patients, it was then used in too cavalier a fashion: tragedy ensued due to its toxicity, and it was promptly denounced as a dangerous poison. Withdrawn hastily from patients who needed it, their suicides caused another re-think and its status as wonder drug was reinstated.

In lithium's favour, it is a naturally occurring mineral mined from the ground. Most other drugs are synthetic chemicals, which does not inspire trust in a generation mistrustful of science in general and chemicals in particular. For example, Pat Thomas writing in the respected periodical the Ecologist, warns of forty-one dangerous chemicals present in your household environment, causing everything from asthma to cancer. Amongst which is the vicious "Benzaldehyde, 4-hydroxy-3-methoxy". According to Thomas, anyone who ate custard as a child should be dead by now, since this substance is otherwise known as vanillin, its chief flavouring ingredient.

Suspicion of synthetic materials is not always very rational!

Medicines from the rainforest

We predict that with the swing towards the natural, drugs of the future will be herbal medicines from the rainforest. But what exactly will these medicines do?

Let's take mood stabilisers for an example. These drugs are claimed to abolish abnormal elation and perhaps depression, leaving normal emotions intact. The truth is a bit different, in our experience. One of us (JK) demonstrated over twenty years ago that lithium dampens a person's emotional responsiveness generally as well as just being a cure for mania. The other author (JG) has discovered at first hand that mood stabilisers - like all psychotropic drugs - have side effects which drug companies and doctors are frequently prone to underestimate.

What about major tranquillisers, or antipsychotics as they are now called? To be fair, the newest antipsychotics claim with some justification to be much gentler than the old "chemical straitjackets". They do not crush down emotion as extremely as yesterday's drugs. But the enlightened psychiatric treatments of the future will take this one stage further.

Recognising the value of emotions, even when intense and inconvenient, the new natural medicines will merely restore them to their normal quality. A sweet sadness, rather than the warped and twisted version which is clinical depression. A joyous and creative liveliness, rather than the useless overactivity and exhaustion which is clinical hypomania.

Indeed, we can even predict the name of one of these novel therapeutic agents. It is taken from a word coined by an inventive person we know, said to be suffering from the condition presently called schizophrenia. The word is enjolification. The new compound, far superior to the present drug known as Abilify, will be called Enjolify, and will transform the lives of thousands in years to come.

“The new compound will be called Enjolify”

Less drug addiction

Will there be any problems of drug addiction? Not really, because most recreational substances will have been legalised or at least decriminalised by that time. Others will have been reinvented as respectable prescription drugs.

However, there will always be rebels and non-conformists. For them, speakeasies will spring up, serving concoctions of e-numbers and dangerous chemicals, since by that time practically every useful man-made substance will have been banned by the do-gooders in Brussels.

What about alternative or complementary treatments? Well, there will probably be a new kind of “electrical treatment”, or more accurately electromagnetic treatment. We envisage an advanced form of Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation available over the counter from a simple headset.





Cycling rapidly

Looking further ahead, what of the next century? One thing's for sure, the swings of the pendulum will be faster. Just as world will heat up and weather patterns become more extreme, so with faster communication, trends will become short lived, merging into one another. The picture known to psychiatrists as "rapid cycling". But by that time, genetic engineering will have hopefully adapted us for long term space travel ...

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Authors' note:

This article is a slightly shortened and illustrated version of one originally published in 2005, in a journal called Progress in Neurology and Psychiatry. Having reviewed it 12 years later, it seems to have stood the test of time. Or to put it another way, it has aged gracefully, as hopefully, have its authors.

Some of its predictions have come true, or are close to doing so. Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation is an active area of research, while the therapeutic potential of tetrahydrocannabinol (from cannabis resin) is increasingly recognised. The "do-gooders in Brussels" have been brought down to size by Brexit. And while speakeasies serving concoctions of dangerous chemicals are not quite with us, designer drugs are a real concern.