

BOOK REVIEW

## Power and Dependence — Social Audit on the Safety of Medicines, Charles Medawar: Bath Press. 1992, 283 pp

Psychoactive drugs including benzodiazepine tranquillisers are amongst the most widely prescribed drugs in the world today. In 1986, World Health Organisation (WHO) convened a group in St Georges Hospital, London, to consider the extent of the problem. The working group found that benzodiazepine tranquillisers were widely prescribed at periods of emotional upset or crisis, even when there was no evidence of mental illness. Benzodiazepines were sometimes prescribed in too high doses and for prolonged periods, often by non-psychiatrists. In susceptible patients, such unrestricted use could lead to dependence and withdrawal symptoms could also be severe. WHO recognised that the problem of this inappropriate and irrational use of benzodiazepines is a major health hazard throughout the world today.

In light of this, the publication of *Power and Dependence* by Charles Medawar is timely. The book, published by Social Audit on the Safety of Medicines which is based in London, traces the history of the development of benzodiazepine tranquillisers, how one drug after another was introduced and promoted as the 'safe' replacement. It highlights the present weakness in drug approval by regulating agencies. It analyses the marketing strategy adopted by multi-national drug companies to promote the use of benzodiazepine and accuses the pharmaceutical industry of practising double standards and suppressing the truth. The book takes to task the irrational prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers by the doctor for the patient, taking for granted that this would help their patient when in actual fact it might not. The theme of *Power and Dependence* is consumer protection and rational drug use. The author has brilliantly put across the message by using benzodiazepine tranquillisers as an example. A well-written book and certainly a well-researched book in which more than 500 references are quoted. This book also contains a section referred to as 'Grey Cards' for readers to report reactions to this book. It would be interesting to analyse the reactions of readers. Perhaps the author should publicise the reactions received subsequently. I strongly recommend that the book be read by members of drug regulatory agencies, doctors, members of other health professionals, executives of drug companies and the general public, particularly those with interest in consumer protection and rational drug use.

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