

Link between serotonin and depression ‘marketing of a myth’

The widely held belief that depression is due to low levels of serotonin in the brain and that raising those levels is an effective treatment is invalid, according to David Healy, Professor of Psychiatry at the Hergest psychiatric unit in North Wales. Instead it is “the marketing of a myth.”

The serotonin reuptake inhibiting (SSRI) group of drugs came on stream in the late 1980s, nearly two decades after first being mooted, writes Healy. The delay centered on finding an indication.

After concerns emerged about tranquillizer dependence in the early 1980s, drug companies marketed SSRIs for depression, “even though they were weaker than older tricyclic antidepressants, and sold the idea that depression was the deeper illness behind the superficial manifestations of anxiety,” [he explains in BMJ](#). The approach was an astonishing success, “central to which was the notion that SSRIs restored serotonin levels to normal, a notion that later transmuted into the idea that they remedied a chemical imbalance.”

In the 1990s, no one knew if SSRIs raised or lowered serotonin levels, he writes – and they still don’t know. There was no evidence that treatment corrected anything.

He suggests that the myth “co-opted” many, including the complementary health market, psychologists, and journals. But above all the myth co-opted doctors and patients, he says. “For doctors it provided an easy short hand for communication with patients. For patients, the idea of correcting an abnormality has a moral force that can be expected to overcome the scruples some might have had about taking a tranquillizer, especially when packaged in the appealing form that distress is not a weakness.”

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: [The Depression Serotonin Link Is A Myth](#)