



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks  
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.  
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## "Treating Depression Is A Major Problem"

In our pill popping nation, doctors are writing prescriptions faster than Congress can spend money. This is especially true for anti-depression drugs, whereby doctors write about 3.5 million prescriptions annually. Drug sales are booming and deaths from prescription medications are now exceeding deaths from illegal drugs for the first time in our nation's history. As I like to say, "There's gold in them thar' pills" and in many cases, the drug companies "are making a killing." Routine medications like the anti-anxiety drugs (Xanax and Valium) and sleep aids (Restoril and Ambien) are experiencing new heights in sales, along with the antidepressant Prozac. Paxil (paroxetine) and Eli Lilly and Co's Prozac (fluoxetine) affect the brain chemical, serotonin. Use of antidepressant drugs doubled from 1996 to 2005 and users increased from 13 million to 27 million. An article in Archives of General Psychiatry shows that antidepressant use is spread across all socio-demographic groups. In 2008, more than 164 million prescriptions were written for antidepressants, totaling \$9.6 billion in U.S. sales. Drug companies have been guilty of "doctoring" (altering) results of studies on antidepressants and in the past, three studies showing Zoloft's ineffectiveness were mysteriously not published. The really scary part is these antidepressant drugs are being recommended for children as young as 3 years of age and since 2005, black box warnings are required on all antidepressants in children and teens. Still, clinical trials have shown that suicidal thoughts have increased in these groups and antidepressants such as Prozac, early in pregnancy, may double the risk that a newborn will be born with a heart defect. Now, we find that middle-aged men who use antidepressants are more likely to have a narrowing of blood vessels, increasing the risk of heart attacks and strokes, than those who do not use the medications. A study of twins, presented at the American Cardiology scientific meeting, found evidence of atherosclerosis, as measured by the interior thickness of the carotid artery, regardless of the type of antidepressant taken. As each year of life has been associated with a 10 micron increase in carotid artery thickening, the brother taking the antidepressant had arteries that were essentially four years older than those of his non-medicated twin. One expert said, "This study reminds us that medicines often have side effects we can't feel, and we should always take that into account."

In the America that I love, we are becoming more afraid of drugs than ever. The powerful pharmaceutical industry and its army of lobbyists conduct continual campaigns of persuasion to increase sales and profits. We can't live a "pill-free life" but it creates great angst when the side effects of the drugs are worse than the conditions being treated.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.  
Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate  
27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444  
985-229-6955 – Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell  
[rhowesmd@hughes.net](mailto:rhowesmd@hughes.net) [www.thepundit.com](http://www.thepundit.com)