

Ritalin's reign

Globe and Mail Update

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June 9, 2007 at 1:44 AM EDT

Ritalin, the brand name for methylphenidate hydrochloride, has been the drug of choice to treat children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) for nearly 40 years.

Developed by the pharmaceutical company Ciba in 1954, it was initially prescribed to adults as a treatment for depression, chronic fatigue and narcolepsy.

Beginning in the 1960s, the central-nervous-system stimulant began to be prescribed to hyperactive children for its calming effect. In particular, it increased the time children could stay focused on an activity.

During the 1980s, prescriptions in the United States for children really began to climb. Canada wasn't far behind, with the psychotropic drug's popularity soaring in the 1990s. Prescriptions were up 500 per cent from the previous decade.

Pediatricians began to take notice of the worrying trend and recommended in 2000 that Ritalin be prescribed only in very limited circumstances, and, even then, only for as long as necessary.

Worldwide, about 75 per cent of Ritalin prescriptions are for children, with four times as many boys on it as girls.

The Public Health Agency of Canada in 2004 reported that many adolescents were taking Ritalin as a recreational drug to stay awake, to increase attentiveness, to suppress appetite and to get high.

Research out of Atlantic Canada found that about 8.5 per cent of children in Grades 7 to 12 had taken Ritalin for non-medicinal purposes, compared with 5.3 per cent who were prescribed it.

Doctor's orders

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Globe and Mail Update

June 9, 2007 at 1:50 AM EDT

Stan Kutcher, a child psychologist and Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax, estimates that between 2 and 6 per cent of children ages five to seven suffer from mental-health disorders requiring treatment; for early adolescents under 14, the number rises to 7 to 11 per cent; by the late teens, research indicates roughly 18 per cent have diagnosable mental-health issues. The documents obtained by The Globe and Mail included Crown wards reviews at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Toronto Catholic Children's Aid Society, Durham Children's Aid Society, Family and Children's Services of Niagara, and Windsor-Essex Children's Aid Society. The children in permanent care with those agencies accounted for a little

more than 18 per cent of the province's roughly 9,400 Crown wards. Psychotropic drugs most commonly prescribed to children:

ANALEPTICS

Examples are Ritalin, Adderall XR, Biphentin and Concerta.

- Used to treat inattention, distractibility, agitation, impulsiveness and hyperactivity.
- Approved by Health Canada for use with children.
- Doctors in Canada recommended their use to treat children 17 and under an estimated 1,125,000 times in 2006.

ATYPICAL ANTIPSYCHOTICS Examples are Risperdal, Zyprexa, Seroquel and Clozaril.

- Used to treat schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and mania.
- Not approved by Health Canada for use with children.
- Doctors in Canada recommended their use to treat children 17 and under an estimated 363,000 times in 2006.

SEROTONIN REUPTAKE INHIBITORS Examples are Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, Celexa, Luvox and Anafranil.

- Used to treat depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder and eating disorders.
- Not approved by Health Canada for use with children.
- Doctors in Canada recommended their use to treat children 17 and under an estimated 360,000 times in 2006.

Sources: *IMS Health Canada, Health Canada*