

Is Insomnia a Disease?

Or, is it a normal part of life that's been medicalized by available treatment?

We generally identify a disease before we look around for its treatment. Observers argue that, these days, the sequence sometimes is reversed: The marketing of a pharmaceutical agent gives birth to a disease, often by "medicalizing" what is actually a natural part of human existence. Has this process created an epidemic of insomnia in the U.S.?

Researchers examined recent trends in the diagnosis and treatment of sleeplessness, using data from an annual population-based survey of U.S. outpatient visits. Between 1993 and 2007, patient complaints of sleeplessness more than doubled, and ICD-9 diagnoses of insomnia rose more than sevenfold. Both these increases, however, were dwarfed by the skyrocketing number of prescriptions written for sedative hypnotics. Benzodiazepine prescriptions increased modestly (by about 50%) from 1993 to 2007, whereas prescriptions for non-benzodiazepine sedative hypnotics (zolpidem [Ambien and others] and similar drugs) soared 30-fold.

The results in 2007: an estimated 5.7 million complaints of sleeplessness, 6.1 million diagnoses of insomnia, and 16 million prescriptions written. The authors suggest that these divergent curves imply that "life problems are being treated with medical solutions," without much attention being given to anything but the prescription pad.

Comment: These authors make a cogent case for the cart leading the horse (or the pill leading the pen, as the case may be) in the creation of a pseudo-epidemic of insomnia. To be fair, it could also be argued that in the pre-zolpidem era, the dearth of convenient therapy meant patients never bothered to complain. The same chicken-or-egg scenario undoubtedly also applies to "social phobia" and a host of other conditions born at about the same time as their indicated treatments.

— [Abigail Zuger, MD](#)

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