

Drug Prescribing and Use in an American Community

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The overall patterns of drug prescribing and use in an entire community were studied for a year. A substantial proportion of the drugs prescribed were psychotropic agents that either sedate or stimulate. These psychotropic drugs accounted for 17% of all prescriptions, with almost 13% of all patients receiving one of these agents through a doctor's prescription. The amphetamines were the eighth most frequently dispensed class of drugs, with almost 3% of all patients who received a prescription being given an amphetamine. The general impression that there is a high rate of psychotropic drug use in the United States was substantiated in this community study.

IN RECENT YEARS there has been a great deal of interest in patterns of drug prescribing and use in the United States. We have been called an "over-medicated" society by some, whereas others have claimed that the medical profession has been prescribing drugs with care and restraint.

In an article in this journal in 1969 Sir Derrick

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Dunlop reviewed the patterns of drug consumption in Britain over the past two decades (1). He pointed out that the removal of the financial barrier between the patient and drugs has led to increasing rates of prescribing, consumption, and amounts spent on drugs by the British National Health Service. He expressed particular concern with the increasing use of psychotropic medicines, which accounted for "some 15% of the total written."

In the United States most patients still pay "out-of-pocket" for their prescribed drugs, but examination of national marketing research data suggests patterns of prescribing and use similar to that of Britain. To help explain these trends this study describes patterns of drug prescribing and use in an entire community.

Methods

A COMPUTERIZED PRESCRIPTION RECORDING SYSTEM

Since 1963 a computerized prescription recording system has been monitoring 85% of the prescriptions dispensed in a defined geographic area, hospital pharmacies being excluded from the study (2). The area, which is located in a United States mid-Atlantic state, has a population of 112 000, 97% of which is Caucasian, mainly of Italian and East European ancestry. There are three voluntary hospitals but no university