

Barry Blackwell: Pioneers and Controversies in Psychopharmacology

Chapter 20: The ADHD Controversy

Keith Conners in his own words

Preamble

One of the 10 books in the previous chapter (18) is *ADHD Nation* (Schwartz 2016). It provides perhaps the best example of the way in which the pharmaceutical industry operates to inflate the use of their products in a manner harmful to the community. This case deals with the use of addictive stimulant drugs in children diagnosed with what was originally known as Minimal Brain Disorder (MBD), but became Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the DSM diagnostic system.

Big Pharma's *modus operandi* to inflate use is to recruit leading academics and researchers, so called Key Opinion Leaders (KOL's), who are heavily compensated – five to six figures annually, for research, lectures and advocacy of the drugs. In this instance, it led the FDA to greenlight the compounds as “safe and effective” and created “a self-affirming circle of science that squashed all dissent.” The end result was a billion-dollar annual market expected to double every three-five years. This Chapter offers a unique insight into this process via an interview with Keith Conners, an involved, major lifelong KOL.

Alan Schwartz began his work as a reporter for the New York Times and his book, *ADHD Nation*, became a successful best seller, in part because of the skillful, well-reasoned manner in which the story was told. Schwartz acknowledged the reality of the condition and the reasonable estimate of its prevalence in 5% of children. He demonstrated this had tripled overall, but also affected up to half of all children in selected sub-populations. He identified the cause as misdiagnosis and over-prescribing, magnified by claims that the drugs “reduced conflict with parents, deterred substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases.”

The book was cleverly designed to highlight the manner in which two children were lured into inappropriate use of stimulants to which they became addicted, disrupting their education and persisting into adult life.

Alan also focusses on the roles of two prominent psychiatrists, Paul Wender and Keith Conners. The latter developed a lifelong interest in MBD while a Ph.D. psychology student at Harvard; developed valid rating scales used worldwide to diagnose the condition; and became a KOL for Eli Lilly and their drugs during his career. Eventually, when the risk of addiction was acknowledged, Lilly developed a new compound that was non-addictive but also less effective, a caveat Keith Conners mentioned in his lectures. Lilly objected and threatened to end their lucrative contract. Keith refused to compromise, resigned and retired.

When Keith eventually read Alan's articles in the Times they communicated and he was invited to meet the two now adult and abstinent characters. Realizing he had participated in a "national disaster of dangerous proportions" he encouraged Alan to write his book.

Chapter 19 is a verbatim account of Keith Conners' thoughts and feelings in his own words during a phone conversation five months prior to his death.

Reference:

Schwarz A. ADHD Nation. Children, Doctors, Big Pharma, and the Making of an American Epidemic. Little, Brown, 2017.

Eulogy

Keith Conners

(1933-2017)

In his own words

by Barry Blackwell

On January 26, 2017, five months before his death, I spoke with Keith Connors for more than 30 minutes to obtain his general views on Alan Schwartz's book *ADHD Nation*, as well as his specific opinions concerning the overall field of ADHD, the role played by Paul Wender and manner in which this is portrayed by Swartz.

At the time of my interview Keith was an inpatient on a cardiac care unit where he had been hospitalized for almost two weeks. He was quite lucid and thoughtful and gave permission to cite his opinions as a personal communication. I indicated that if this were to occur I would share any material prior to posting on INHN.org. We did this and he approved of what follows.

I was surprised to learn that Keith Connors had become a close confidant of Alan Schwartz, had not only provided much of the material in the book, but had been instrumental in persuading Schwartz to write it. He expressed admiration for the author's statistical skills and decision to leave journalism to become a high school math teacher.

At the same time Keith gave a fair-minded appraisal of the book noting that Schwartz had adopted a tone and theme that earned a Pulitzer Prize nomination. It is structured like a novel, (almost a detective story), in which Keith is a sympathetic lead character and Paul Wender is portrayed as a foil and "firebrand."

With regard to the whole ADHD controversy Keith saw it as an "eye of the beholder" phenomenon in which folks could view the same data differently and even the same person might "flip images." Keith saw himself as starting as a "true believer," originally a Big Pharma KOL, who eventually realized he had made a terrible mistake in what had become a tragedy for the profession. Paul Wender's role had been more nuanced but less volatile. Like Keith, he began as a true believer and remained one, far too much an independent thinker to become a KOL, whose research was funded more by NIMH than industry.

Keith believed Paul felt that the pharmaceutical industry had made skilled use of complicit academic psychiatrists in inflating the prevalence of ADHD and use of stimulants in children, including memberships in associations promoting increased drug usage.

In Paul's involvement with the 1980 revision of DSM III he was ahead of his time in noting the different ADHD symptom profiles between genders with the virtual absence of hyperactivity

in girls. Another major contribution was Paul's advocacy for extending the ADHD diagnosis to adults. Keith regarded Paul as a brilliant and innovative clinician with a sharp wit and provocative style whose valid clinical observations were categorized by Shwartz as designed to inflate usage of stimulants. At the same time Keith agreed with Shwartz that the DSM criteria might contribute to inflating the prevalence of ADHD by advocating a "stripped down" version of the Conner's Scale using duplicative symptom criteria.

Keith also felt that industry had developed its own poorly validated and corrupt rating scales used by KOLs and pharma reps to train primary care providers in the presumptive diagnosis of ADHD and use of stimulants.

Paul Wender's other major but still controversial contribution was his advocacy for extending ADHD diagnosis to adults. The epidemiologic evidence for an inflated prevalence of ADHD diagnosis and use of stimulants in children (particularly boys) is convincing in some sub-populations but its presence, symptomatology and response to treatment in adults is still not well defined. However, research in New Zealand has recently confirmed that in up to a third of children with ADHD symptoms persist as adults, with a reduction in over activity but persistence of internal restlessness. A type of adult onset ADHD clearly occurs and can persist into the 80s but response to stimulants is more variable. Keith notes this adult ADHD population may be double in size to childhood forms creating a large, lucrative and appealing target for industry abetted by KOLs and new rating scales.

ADHD Nation was published in 2016 and Paul Wender died of a heart attack in July. Keith did not know if he knew or not of the book's existence and the unjust role Schwartz assigned him.

Keith died at age 84 on July 5th, 2017 (my own 83rd birthday). Shortly before his death he collaborated with Allen Frances and Bernie Carroll who helped him write his own Obituary for the British Medical Journal, a final warning about the over diagnosis of ADHD and inappropriate over prescribing of stimulant drugs engineered by the pharmaceutical companies abetted by compliant academic psychiatrists bribed to be Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs).

April 26, 2018