

not struggling for something to eat or a warm bed but such topics don't hold the younger listener for long. Hitting one's fifties makes conversations about general health more relevant; get to your eighties and suddenly knees and back pain can be all-consuming providing, unlike Amis's mentor Bellow, dementia makes any kind of discussion impossible.

Amis carried on visiting Hitchens across the Atlantic and within the US throughout his friend's last years. Sometimes there is humour, always compassion but an inexorability to the end rendering swathes of text both impossible to read and impossible not to. It would be a brave person nursing someone with cancer who could read this but, perhaps a few years on, that person would find they had made a friend out there.

Part IV alternates autobiography with sections on 'How to Write.' Like others before him in the field of arts and sport, Amis suggests that there exists an inborn talent to be honed. If you don't already write, then you probably won't; it is a skill fast vanishing in this digital age. If you do, then there is much to be learned – how to end chapters and paragraphs, what not to repeat in sentences, where to use the full stop. These sections are a gift to the potential wordsmith who will be assailed with moments of reassurance and the need for reflection.

And the back cover blurb? "... Art consists of choices; with life, you just take what is given. Finally, art can at least aspire to be deathless. And life isn't like that."

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Discontinuing antidepressant medications

Giovanni A. Fava

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Giovanni Andrea Fava has written a landmark book. The author has been a professor of clinical psychology in Bologna since 1997 and a clinical professor of psychiatry at the New York State University at Buffalo since 1999. There he established a department for depression. He has been publishing in specialists' journals about the tolerance and dependence on antidepressants, specifically SRIs and SNRIs. Fava has finally shared his knowledge on development and prevention of dependence in a concise and organized manner. The book offers guidance on responsible prescribing of antidepressants and highlights the importance of personalized support when discontinuing them. For Fava depression is a severe illness that can have recurring episodes and be life-threatening. He argues for a rational use of antidepressants, limiting them to the most severe and persistent depressions, as they could be life-saving.

According to the revised ICD-10, antidepressants belong to the group of drugs that do not produce dependence.

The consequence of this classification is that people who have problems stopping antidepressants usually do not receive understanding, help or rehabilitation services. The manufacturers do not have to warn about the risk of physical dependence in their information inserts, so doctors cannot make a differential diagnosis. Without a differential diagnosis to differentiate between withdrawal symptoms of reducing or discontinuing an antidepressant and a relapse of the presumed depressive state, patients risk being unnecessarily treated with antidepressants and getting worse prognoses for diseases with social consequences. And doctors do not have a diagnosis code with which they can settle their possible action when discontinuing with the health insurance companies. In addition, withdrawal is done far too quickly, and according to Fava, even slow tapering does not completely prevent withdrawal problems.

In twelve chapters he explains how withdrawal syndromes come about and how one can reduce the risk of their occurrence. How withdrawal syndromes manifest clinically, what the pathophysiology of withdrawal syndromes is, how the decision to discontinue should be made and what the setting for supervised discontinuation should look like: namely, a basic unit consisting of a psychiatrist with adequate background knowledge in both pharmacology and psychotherapy, an internist who can provide specialised medical treatment, especially for endocrine and cardiovascular problems, and four experienced clinical

psychotherapists. As an alternative to the basic unit, a pharmacopsychology service could operate, specifically dealing with problems in withdrawal from prescribed psychotropic drugs.

He emphasises that experience with previous treatments should also be included in the clinical assessment of the withdrawal process and in pharmacological strategies and options. Furthermore, he proposes three flanking psychotherapeutic modules (explanatory, cognitive-behavioural therapy and the well-being therapy he himself created), and ends with a plea for the prevention of dependence development and withdrawal syndromes.

By explaining adaptation reactions, i.e., changes in serotonin receptors or receptor binding, Fava shows that it is the practitioners who aggravate and chronify depression with the continuing prescription of antidepressants and the ever-increasing dosages or increasing combinations. The interpretation of substance-related withdrawal problems as "discontinuation syndromes", i.e., problems to be located in those affected, only serves the interests of the pharmaceutical industry; a different psychiatry is needed.

A rational approach based on the interests of those affected; psychiatrists with a background in pharmacodynamics; experienced psychotherapists; teams with internists... Even if we may shake our heads and wonder whether we will experience all this in our lifetime, the impetus of this book should not be underestimated. Millions of sufferers

swallow antidepressants; perhaps they will increasingly wake up and question the continuous use of these chemical substances. And maybe one day a doctor will be interested in adapting the now outdated knowledge acquired in training to the more advanced state of science. Or maybe a health insurance company or a politician will consider how much money – and not to forget: how much suffering on the part of those affected and their families – could be saved in the long run with competent support during withdrawal. Fava's impressive book would certainly have a big part to play in this.

Peter Lehmann

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