

Family Therapists Fly the Banner for Alternatives to Psychopharmacology



Author, Robert Whitaker
(courtesy photo)

The Louisiana Association for Marriage and Family Therapy will be flying the banner for alternatives to the growing trend toward psychotropic medication when they host science writer and author Robert Whitaker at their upcoming annual conference. The conference, "Psychotherapeutic Alternatives to Medication," will be held at the Renaissance Hotel in Baton Rouge, February 19 through 21. Whitaker, author of *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*, and Dr. Jacqueline Sparks, Professor at University of Rhode Island, an expert in outcomes research, will be keynote presenters at the conference.

"Our training and our bent is toward the less restrictive, less invasive, most holistic kinds of care," said Dr. Matt Morris, President of Louisiana Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, "and that often entails intervening at the system level rather than just at the patient level."

"The problem," Morris told the *Times*, "may relate to their system—their family system, their interpersonal system, their community system—and less to their psychobiology. We don't use medications for the whole family," he said.

Morris explained that his community is concerned about the vulnerable populations, specifically "... the mentally ill members of our communities and the children and adolescents," he said. "By history, Marriage and Family Therapists also have a bent toward social justice issues and so in Robert Whitaker we see these themes coalescing, namely the use of psychotropic medication and some of our most vulnerable populations. The two themes are social justice and the holistic approach," he explained.

Whitaker's *Anatomy of an Epidemic* takes a critical look at the underlying problems in the growing use of drugs in the treatment of mental illness and he draws some disturbing conclusions. He shows that the dramatic rise in the use of psychopharmaceuticals has coincided not with a decline, but rather with a rise in both mental illness and mental illness disability. He reviews the failed theory of chemical imbalance and concludes that psychiatric drugs can disrupt brain function and lead to chronic illness on their own.

Dr. Morris explained the conference has multiple goals. "The theme of the conference is psycho-therapeutic alternatives to medication," he said, "so we're not just talking about the problem with medication but what we can do as therapists to support our clients, for coping and overcoming and living with their distress."

Tom Moore, family therapist and Director of the Red River Institute located in Shreveport, considers Whitaker's book an important one. "Whitaker is offering a long-overdue critique of the mental health profession as a whole—not just psychiatry but all those mental health professions that have evolved from psychiatry," Moore told the *Times*. "The molecular hypothesis of mental illness will eventually go down in history as one of the foundational myths of the modern age."

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Moore added, "Much like Galileo, who challenged the notion that the earth was the center of the universe, so Whitaker—along with a rising chorus of others—is hastening the demise of the molecular hypothesis," he said. "And, like Galileo, many in the mental health establishment would love to burn him at the stake for heresy."

Author Robert Whitaker confirmed that there has been some backlash for him. "In response to *Anatomy*," he told the *Times*, "the 'critics' have of course criticized me personally. I am biased, I cherry-picked the data, and so forth. And by writing the book, which provides such a counter-narrative to prevailing wisdom, you naturally open yourself up to such 'kill the messenger' attacks," he said. "And I did initially feel that there were some repercussions for me as a journalist."

However, Whitaker also feels that a saving grace was when the prestigious Investigative Reporters and Editors Association awarded him the Best Investigative Journalism book for 2010, sandwiched among other top winners for newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*.

"That was a confirmation for me personally," Whitaker said, "that I had stayed true to journalistic principles in the book. Moreover, the book has now been translated into a number of languages, and so that is rewarding too," he said.

In the 2014 Louisiana legislature, the Marriage and Family Therapists put forth a bill to clarify scope and added the term "diagnosis" to their licensing law. However, a consultation and collaboration clause was also included, mirroring the one added to the counselors' 2011 Act 320 that requires consulting with a prescribing medical professional on serious cases.

Tom Moore is concerned about this issue. "At the legislative level, the scopes of practice of mental health professions continue to be shaped by profit, politics, and turf rather than the actual needs of the consuming public," he said. "The result of this 'cart before horse' approach is restricted trade for qualified mental health professionals, restricted access for the public to mental health services, and higher costs for professional and consumer alike."

Robert Whitaker says there have been a few changes since *Anatomy*. "There is more discussion going on in psychiatry today," he told the *Times*, "about the need to use low doses of psychiatric medications, and at times to support drug withdrawal protocols. In addition, there has been a fair amount of new research published that supports the conclusions drawn in *Anatomy*."

"The problem is," he said, "that the changes in practice are the exception to the rule. The prescribing of stimulants and antidepressants goes up and up, and polypharmacy is so common when an antipsychotic is prescribed. And the number of people going on disability continues to climb too."

What is it going to take to stop this automatic slide toward more and more medication? "I am not sure," he said. "I don't think the scientific 'evidence' really matters. Family doctors and psychiatrists are primed to prescribe the drugs, the public

has been taught to ask for them, and it doesn't really matter whether they aren't very effective over the short term, and worsen long-term outcomes. We have become a society awash in psychotropic drugs."

Tom Moore said he is hopeful that professional organizations continue to work to get the word out to use approaches most relevant to the consumer and "shuck medical model envy." He believes that the state conference and the training at his Red River Institute will help.

Whitaker said he thinks the change will have to come in a grassroots movement in consumers. "The societal discussion needs to change," he said, "and my guess is that is where it will be changing in a meaningful way, in discussions among users of the drugs."

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Robert Whitaker, Author
Anatomy of an Epidemic

After studying as a fellow at the Edmond J. Safra Research Lab on Institutional Corruption at Harvard University, Whitaker is now writing a more academic book with co-author Lisa Cosgrove. Together they look at academic psychiatry through the lens of institutional corruption and how "economies of influence" can lead an institution away from serving its public mission, he said. The book, *Psychiatry Under the Influence: Institutional Corruption, Social Injury, and Prescriptions for Reform*, will be out this April.