

Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 5(3) - On the one hand: In support of Cognitive Enhancing Drugs

April 8, 2009

In [an earlier science review](#), we noted the increase in college student use of prescription drugs for cognitive enhancement. This growing trend has not only sparked a debate within the medical and legal communities about drug safety and prescription drug abuse (Greely et al., 2008); it also has raised broader cultural issues about competitiveness, fairness, and what it means to “cheat.” In this issue and the next issue of *Addiction and the Humanities*, we examine both sides of this debate and hope that you will also weigh in with your opinion. First, we present the Greely and colleagues case for the responsible use of cognitive enhancing drugs by healthy individuals for whom these drugs were not prescribed (Greely et al., 2008).

The drugs most commonly used for cognitive enhancement work by enhancing “executive function,” either by improving the ability to focus (Ritalin and Aderall), remember (Aricept), or avoid fatigue (Provigil) (Greely et al., 2008). Greely and colleagues argue that the use of these drugs for cognitive enhancement is simply a new tool in the persistent human quest for self-improvement, one that requires less effort than more conventional methods of improving brain function such as education, exercise, and proper nutrition.

Greely and colleagues argue that the potential benefits of drug use for cognitive enhancement justify a serious evaluation of the risks and benefits. Among the potential benefits, they suggest, are “improved quality of life and extended work productivity, as well as [the ability to] stave off normal and pathological age-related declines” (Beddington et al., 2008; Greely et al., 2008, p. 705).



Greely and colleagues dismiss three commonly raised arguments against the use of prescription drugs for cognitive enhancement in otherwise healthy adults (i.e., it is cheating, unnatural, and it amounts to drug abuse). However, due to the risks and benefits of new advances, they believe that the concern for safety, freedom, and fairness of cognitive-enhancing is justified, and suggest some policy methods to control usage and prevent its potential negative impact (i.e. an accelerated research program, the participation of relevant professional organizations to formulate guidelines for use, education to increase the understanding of cognitive enhancement, and legislation that will change with shifting social norms).

Discussion

Greely and colleagues present an argument in favor of drug use for cognitive enhancement and discuss the need for more research about the long-term effects of these drugs. In [our next issue](#), we will present an opposing view from dissenters who disagree with the assertion that prescription drugs should be used by otherwise healthy individuals for cognitive enhancement.

- Ingrid Maurice

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

References

Beddington, J., Cooper, C. L., Field, J., Goswami, U., Huppert, F. A., Jenkins, R., et al. (2008). The mental wealth of nations. *Nature*, 455(7216), 1057-1060.

Greely, H., Sahakian, B., Harris, J., Kessler, R. C., Gazzaniga, M., Campbell, P., et al. (2008). Towards responsible use of cognitive-enhancing drugs by the healthy. *Nature*, 456(7223), 702-705.