

Psychoactive drugs can induce many bizarre effects

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

The consensus is we could, if we wanted to, become a drugged society.

Choose the mood you want and there's probably a chemical substance to change your emotional status, to illuminate the horizons of mental functioning, to dull the pathways to action.

A pill to make a drunk man sober? A way to produce rubber from mushrooms? To induce amnesia? Or to reduce an innocent little child into a bewildered, self-doubting mass?

A bizarre grope into the world of science fiction?

No:

Psychoactive chemicals (there are hundreds) can do some of these things, all through the processes of an endlessly complicated organ — the human brain.

Medical science is as yet unclear on exactly how these potent chemicals bend the mind. A duplication of their mechanism of action is still being attempted by tireless researchers in laboratories across the country.

What is clear is that the complex little compounds do change moods — sometimes too well.

The antipsychotic substances used and contemplated for use at Willowbrook Developmental Center have been administered widely for two decades. Some call the frequency a "prescription drug scandal."

Patients in mental hospitals are often placed on regimens of the powerful, would-be toxic chemicals to control behavior deemed psychotic.

Sometimes they brighten lives like a star on a dark, murky night.

And sometimes they take their toll.

An Island woman, who would speak only with the promise of anonymity, recalled yesterday a horrifying, bitter world while on drugs in Manhattan State

Hospital.

A mental patient for five years (all told), she described herself as one of the first persons "to have Mellaril tried out on them."

Mellaril, according to today's medical thought, is one of the less powerful psychoactives.

But it changed this woman's mood and she began to wonder: "Who's gonna wind me up when I stop."

The woman, 60 now, said she had dreams of a "horrible death" — a "compulsive" fantasy that came to her night and day.

Mellaril's overall effect was to mold her into a "zombie," she said. She said she felt like a pawn at the hands of a "terrible, stinking world."

She said she voluntarily committed herself to Manhattan State Hospital because of depression, and left in constant fear of "becoming violent."

"I feel now as if I'm a survivor of Hitler's concentration camp and I'm not even Jewish. That's the kind of ordeal the drugs put me through," the woman said.

Twenty years after her experiences, it is still uncommon to find a physician with the sophistication to prescribe Thorazine, Mellaril, Haldol and others in the appropriate manner, according to one study.

Dr. Joel P. Pursner, an Island psychiatrist who is an expert on mood-changers, said oftentimes the drugs are given like water — especially to institutionalized persons.

Incapacitated because of illness or retardation, frightened by strange and impersonal routines and fearful for health or perhaps life, hospitalized patients are often not free to make a choice about treatment when the person for whom they've anchored all their hopes asks: "Say, we think this drug will help you. Do you want to try it?"

That, according to Dr. Pursner, can happen in an institution for the retarded or otherwise, an event less likely to occur in the privacy of a doctor's office.

Antidepressant, antianxiety, hypnotic drugs — each has a purpose and each, if used incorrectly, exposes a patient to hazards.

Parents of Willowbrook residents called the Advance yesterday to describe what they see as uninterrupted, unindicated "medical treatment" being prescribed for their retarded children.

One spoke of a "strange sunburn" that has come to be a permanent aspect of her 31-year-old son's appearance.

"A dark purplish brown pigmentation has been reported in hospitalized patients who are given large amounts of Thorazine for three to five years," an article in a medical journal said.

This woman said her son is given 400 mgs. of Thorazine a day and has been to her knowledge, for seven years.

Another mother described a depression that crept up on her son after Willowbrook personnel began Thorazine medication "years ago."

She said he was "never abusive in his life. He's not bright enough to hurt a fly."

She said he has early awakening and a "self-reproachful" glance. She added: "He's so calm all the time that he's always sleeping."

It is unclear whether the drug regimen of these Willowbrook residents is indicated or justifiable. Their mothers, fearing reprisal, refused to be publicly identified for the purpose of asking Willowbrook administrators about their cases.

But what seems clear from their accounts and those of others is that the drugs are used — perhaps too frequently — and at Willowbrook and institutions across the state, there exists a business of controlling human minds.