a lecture by
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The Emperor’s New Drugs: Medication & Placebo in the Treatment of Depression

Antidepressants are supposed to work by fixing a chemical imbalance, specifically, a lack of serotonin, in the brain. But analyses of published and unpublished data that was hidden by the drug companies reveals that most (if not all) of the benefits are due to the placebo effect. Some antidepressants increase serotonin levels, some decrease serotonin, and some have no effect at all on serotonin. Nevertheless, they all show the same therapeutic benefit. Instead of curing depression, popular antidepressants may induce a biological vulnerability making people more likely to become depressed in the future. Other treatments (e.g., psychotherapy and physical exercise) produce the same short-term benefits as antidepressants, show better long-term effectiveness, and do so without the side effects and health risks of the drugs.

Irving Kirsch is associate director of the Program in Placebo Studies and a lecturer in medicine at the Harvard Medical School (Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center). He is also emeritus professor of psychology at the Plymouth University (UK), University of Hull (UK), and the University of Connecticut. He has published 10 books and more than 200 scientific journal articles and book chapters on placebo effects, antidepressant medication, hypnosis, and suggestion. His meta-analyses on the efficacy of antidepressants altered guidelines for the treatment of depression in the United Kingdom. His book The Emperor’s New Drugs: Exploding the Antidepressant Myth was shortlisted for the prestigious Mind Book of the Year award and was the topic of a 60 Minutes segment on CBS and a five-page cover story in Newsweek.