Editorial

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COLOR IN OUR PILLS

Nearly all the tablets containing tranquilizers, antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, anticonvulsants, and stimulants, are colored. Very few of the drugs in crystalline form are colored, but when they are manufactured they are enclosed in skins containing a variety of colors ranging from pale pastel shades to the dark blues and reds. We do not remember any black pills, probably because black is associated with unhappy events such as sickness and death.

We can understand why these tablets are colored. Each company wishes to establish a clear-cut relationship between its product, its trade name, and a characteristic shape and color. Who does not know that Valium 10's are blue, the 5's are yellow, and the 2's white? It is also easier for the patient to recognize the medication. If a number of different pills have to be taken, this can be helpful.

However, these colors are synthetic dyes, and this will trouble some people. Since Dr. B. Feingold (1974) demonstrated that a large proportion of children suffering from learning and behavioral disorders were responding to these colorants and similar additives, many of us have confirmed his observation.

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Adults, too, react to the color of the tablet with a variety of undesirable sensitivities or allergic reactions, both psychiatric and physical. We have several patients who become ill when they take one 10 mg Valium tablet (blue), but can take five 2 mg Valium tablets (white) with no complaints. Some of my patients who require the therapeutic effect of the drug cannot take the colored tablet unless they carefully wash off the colored coating. This is a tedious and annoying problem; it is also unnecessary.

Some vitamin preparations are also colored, and these have caused similar problems. The only naturally colored vitamins are riboflavin, which is a yellow-orange color, and B-|2 which is red. Artificially colored vitamin tablets may cause as much trouble as the colored tranquilizers.

We suggest that drug companies discontinue the practice of coloring their products, or else that they use pigments known to be safe, such as carotene from carrots, chlorophyll from greens, the red pigment from beets, riboflavin, and some of the natural pigments present in colorful vegetable matter. If they were to do so, or leave their preparations white, they would find a greater acceptance of their product, and they could decrease the number of side effects they have to publish when these drugs are advertised. For it seems probable that some of the side effects ascribed to particular drugs are reactions to the synthetic colors, and not to the ingredient, which alone is supposed to be active.

Pharmacologists, whether working for drug companies, or at universities, seem to be unaware that any ingredient placed in any preparation may elicit undesirable reactions in a few people. Most assume, for example, that carbohydrates such as starch or lactose are inert, and these are used to make up bulk in tablets, or as placebo medication; but for many these are not inert whatever.-If a patient consumes a tablet filled with com starch and happens to be allergic to corn, he can respond with annoying or severe side effects. It has been assumed by research methodologists that any side effects which occur with placebo medication are a psychological response to the act of swallowing something. Every ecologically oriented physician realizes that this conclusion is no longer tenable, as a large proportion, if not all, of the placebo side effects may be allergic reactions to one or more components of the tablet or capsule.

Obviously, it is not possible to take into account every patient's possible allergy or sensitivity, but it is possible, and advisable, not to use those substances already known or suspected of having a large number of patients who will react adversely. This includes all the additives which are commonly not found in the body, or in living matter of any sort.

If a number of patients who respond adversely to colored drugs were to write to the manufacturers about their reactions, I think the companies would be pleased to remove the additives which are not essential except for cosmetic reasons.

REFERENCES

FEINGOLD, B. F.: Why Your Child is Hyperactive. Random House, N.Y., 1974.