

BEHIND THE NEWS ANTI-DEPRESSANT DEBATE

Britain recently banned the prescription of the psychotropic drug Seroxat to minors. So why are Hong Kong's young still being treated with it? *David Watkins* reports

Slow on the uptake

Photo: Ricky Chung

ACCORDING TO KATHRYN Whitfield, her husband Colin was "a very caring, very protective" man who would never have dreamt of harming or causing any distress to his family.

So when, two days after his 56th birthday last autumn, the retired British headmaster locked himself in the garden shed and slit both wrists as his daughter slept upstairs in the house, his wife claimed his actions to be so out of character that something sinister was afoot. Colin Whitfield had left no suicide note, and his widow told the inquest earlier this year that she didn't believe her husband made a conscious decision to die. "I don't think it was an intentional act. There was no way he was in his right mind when he did that," she said. Four years earlier in Wyoming, in the United States, Donald Schell – a man with a history of brief episodes of minor depression – murdered his wife, his daughter and granddaughter before taking his own life.

Schell and Whitfield lived on different continents but had one thing in common: they had both just begun taking a course of Seroxat, the most widely used anti-depressant in the world.

Schell's son-in-law, Tim Tobin, filed a wrongful death suit against the drug's manufacturer Glaxo-SmithKline, and was subsequently awarded US\$6.4 million in 2001 – the first verdict against a pharmaceutical company for a psychiatric side effect from a psychotropic drug. The judgment may not be the last, as scepticism mounts about the safety of Seroxat, and by extension, the entire family of anti-depressants to which it belongs.

The category of selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs) includes familiar names such as Prozac and Zoloft. Together these drugs have com-

pletely transformed the treatment of mental illness over the past decade – with GlaxoSmithKline, estimating that more than 130 million people have been successfully treated using the drug. Prozac, on the promise of alleviating symptoms of depression with fewer side effects than anything that came before it, quickly became the fastest-selling drug of all time – a phenomenon that was only later eclipsed by Viagra.

SSRIs work by slowing the brain's metabolism of serotonin – a hormone often thought of as the brain's "joy juice". Our current understanding of mental illness points to a deficiency of the chemical as a key factor in depres-

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Chief executive, Hong Kong Medical Association

sion, and so the success of these drugs in making more serotonin available has been a medical revolution.

Now, concerns about harmful side effects have taken their place alongside the hopes that modern medicine had finally won the battle against what for many is a debilitating mental illness. Concerns centre around Seroxat, which British health officials have banned for use with patients under 18, on the reasoning that the drug is likely to cause suicidal thoughts among this group. The ban followed last year's BBC *Panorama* television documentary highlighting claims that Seroxat had pushed some people into suicide and led to withdrawal problems in others.

The documentary's response was the largest ever. As far as the British government is concerned, Seroxat's effect on adults also bears looking at. An expert panel has been assembled to examine whether the drug affects adults in the same way it does adolescents, and will produce a report later this year. The result could be a staggering reappraisal of the use of SSRIs.

In Hong Kong, the Department of Health says it will wait for the outcome of the British investigation before it decides on any action of its own. "We'll monitor the situation," a spokesperson says. "We will follow up and... refer to the Pharmaceuticals Registration Committee, which is responsible for

the registration of pharmaceutical products in Hong Kong." However, the department declined to comment on what the implications of a British ban would be for those who are already taking Seroxat or similar drugs. A spokesperson for Glaxo-SmithKline in Hong Kong meanwhile claimed that "the drug is an effective and generally well-tolerated medication, and we believe that both patients and physicians continue to have confidence in the drug because they have witnessed its safety and efficacy first-hand". The statement went on to say that "Seroxat is not supposed to be prescribed to children under 18 locally. The impact of this ban is not significant in Hong Kong."

But according to local psychiatrists, the statement ignores the fact that in severe cases there is no better alternative. "Doctors here tend to use SSRIs in severe cases, such as in treatment of obsessive compulsive disorders," says Lee Sing, professor of Psychiatry at Chinese University of Hong Kong. "Although the entire Asian region only makes up about 5 to 10 per cent of the world market, they are still an essential tool for treating serious cases. It is here where we also prescribe Seroxat to under 18s, despite the fact that the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] has never recommended doing so. Sometimes there really is no other way of helping the sufferer when their case is extreme."

Despite the rising debate, the public should not jump to conclusions, says Greg Wells, a Hong Kong-based psychiatrist. "With depressed adolescents, you look at family issues, life issues themselves and offer psychoactive therapy. With this you also prescribe a programme of SSRI dosage. In terms of the growing doubts about the safety of these drugs, you have to examine those trials [in Britain] and see how the tests were actually set up."

"What you have to remember is that it is common for adolescents to have thoughts of self-harm along with a variety of different disorders – all those sorts of things. The symptom of self-harming thought can be there, but it's not necessarily a symptom of depressive illness. It's a symptom of biological change and the challenges of adolescence."

Dr Wells says the furore surrounding the safety of drugs such as these makes it easy to miss the point about treating mental illness. "I've always found Seroxat very effective in adults

for treating anxiety disorders," he says. "But you have to remember that the body goes under intense biological change during adolescence, and so you therefore have to take a much broader view – you can't just give out drugs and nothing else. This is why treatment teams are the best way to treat adolescents: multi-disciplinary, multi-modal treatment. You try to change their thinking, replacing it with more rational, healthy thoughts as opposed to the negative thoughts that currently exist."

Another main obstacle in this kind of investigation is drawing a distinction between the effects of the drug and the symptoms that it is designed to cure. Thoughts of suicide and self-harm are symptoms of mental illness, so attempting to prove that they are instead provoked by the cure, is a thorny issue. Depression is the main cause of suicide and the makers of the SSRIs say their drugs have been unfairly blamed.

"People forget that you cannot guarantee success," says Professor Lee. "Even with treatment, people with intractable severe depression still give up and commit suicide. Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing received top treatment by a psychiatrist and he still died. We are not successful in every case."

The complexity of mental illness means that it cannot be solved by medication alone, and yet general practitioners worldwide might be tempted to reach for the prescription pad without first confirming the severity of the condition. Many doctors claim that while genuine depression still goes largely untreated, there are many other patients who are not clinically depressed but are being inappropriately treated with SSRIs.

Whitfield, for example, was prescribed Seroxat for anxiety, not depres-

sion. If his doctor had detected any threat of suicide, he would have referred his patient to a psychiatrist.

Could Whitfield have been given the wrong dosage? For Dr Lo Wing-lok, chief executive of the Hong Kong Medical Association, this is the key to the problems that have now arisen.

"Some drugs are inherently unsafe and have serious side effects, but are nevertheless beneficial to people with serious symptoms," he says. "In some cases it is the prescriber and not the drug itself, therefore, that should be restricted. In any treatment, doctors have to assess the balance of risk and benefit – the more serious the illness, the greater the risk that can be tolerated." The high number of people seeking treatment and receiving SSRI prescriptions also raises the risk, Dr Lo adds.

However, Hong Kong's biggest problem is fear. The stigma surrounding mental illness, combined with some doctors' reluctance to investigate emotional problems, has left the region with a potential crisis. "Roughly 80 per cent of people with depression in Hong Kong are not seeking the correct treatment," says Professor Lee. "People don't walk into the clinic and say, 'Doctor, I suspect I have depression'. They instead claim to have pains or sleeping problems, be wrongly diagnosed and so receive the wrong treatment."

A 2000 study conducted by the Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention in Hong Kong found the suicide rate had risen over the past two decades, with an increase in the rate of middle-aged deaths during the more recent, recession-hit years. For sufferers to get the help they need, the fear that still accompanies mental illness must first be broken down – sooner rather than later.

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Kai Tak museum dream more than a flight of fancy

Aviation pioneer Francis Chin wants to use the former airport to honour the past and train pilots of the future, writes *Mary Ann Benitez*

Growing up in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the six Chin brothers were well ahead of their time. When most youngsters were dreaming of owning Cadillacs or Fords, the brothers were taking flying lessons and dreaming of the planes they would own.

The Chins owned the 100-horse-power Beagle Pup, a midget plane loved by flying enthusiasts to this day. Theirs was the 14th to roll off the production lines at Beagle's plants in Shoreham and Rearsby, in Britain. The plane was hailed as a triumph for British aviation design and engineering when it made its maiden flight in 1967, but by 1969, the company was financially doomed, with the cost of manufacturing the Pup greatly exceeding its selling price.

When the Chins heard in the early 70s that Beagle would be closed for lack of support from the British government and the Royal Air Force, the brothers decided to make a statement.

"Knowing that the Beagle Pup was the best light aircraft at that time and should

not be in such a predicament, we decided to fly it from England to Hong Kong to prove its worth and reliability," recalls Francis Chin Yiu-cheong, who was 21 at the time. He and his older brother, Dominic Chin Lo-chong, decided to take on the journey, covering 28,182km.

"[We flew] through the Syrian Desert, the Israeli-Arab war, the Indian-Pakistan war, the Vietnam war... receiving amazing hospitality and friendship all along the way," Francis writes in a memoir on his website, designed with the help of his 13-year-old twin sons.

There were hiccups, of course. An oil cooler gasket leak; running out of fuel 16km out of Bangkok International Air-

port; crossing Mount Victoria at 3,044 metres in an aircraft certified to fly only up to 3,039 metres; and cruising the vast ocean from Borneo to Hong Kong with only two standard life-jackets.

At 11.20pm on January 8, 1972, the Chin brothers made their epic landing on runway 31 of Kai Tak International Airport. The Beagle factory was closed after all, but the Pup did enjoy a revival in the form of the Bulldog, a design from Scottish Aviation that was based on the Beagle blueprint. The Bulldog has gone on to enjoy prominence among flight enthusiasts, and is widely used by the RAF and other militaries for pilot training.

Thirty-one years after taking the Beagle Pup saga, one of the Chin brothers is taking on another crusade. Francis has unintentionally become the spokesman for the Save Kai Tak campaign, which hopes to convince the Hong Kong government to convert the old airport into an aeronautics theme park.

Now retired, the 54-year-old Francis is the only Chin sibling who returned to Hong Kong. Two of his brothers have died, while the three others and a sister have remained overseas. Chin and fellow petitioners have rallied to preserve at least 5,000 feet of the southeast section of the Kai Tak runway for "general aviation".



Francis Chin wants to share the joy of flying from Kai Tak. Photo: David Wong

They argue that the park could draw tourists while also exposing Hong Kong's young to the joys of flying and other sporty hobbies. The proposed park would include parkland for paragliding, go-karting, and car racing training circuits. The short runway would be set aside for helicopters, light aircraft and hangers, there

could be a Hong Kong general aviation centre, and sailing and boating arenas along the southern seafloor, Chin says. The group's vision of the aviation centre includes a museum and room for the various clubs dedicated to aviation, boating and sailing.

Mr Chin has issued an open invitation

to Mr Tung and other officials to join him in an aerial look of old Kai Tak. "I wish to meet them [the government officials] so I can take them up in the helicopter and fly them around the airport so they can see the possibility of doing a three-dimensional plan of the place," he says.

Under government development plans, the Kai Tak Point at the tip of the former runway will become a new "Tourism Node" in Victoria Harbour, together with a cruise terminal in the waterfront area and a heliport nearby. A spokesman for the Economic Development and Labour Bureau said it had received proposals for various developments of southeast Kowloon, including those for aviation-related establishments. The official line is that many proposals are being considered for the area, including the group's.

The Chins' Beagle Pup, Echo Charlie, meanwhile was donated to the Hong Kong Aviation Club in 1983. It has been used by the Hong Kong Air Cadet Corps as a teaching aid and now four volunteer engineers are busy completely refurbishing it. Of course, Mr Chin, as the once-proud owner of Echo Charlie, wouldn't mind one day seeing it take pride of place together with the other Hong Kong memorabilia at the Kai Tak aviation centre.

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