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Editorial: Alternative Treatments in Mental Health

Every linguist will explain that the usage of any word varies in time and place in the same language and that the meaning of the word depends on those who use it. In the early 1950s the concept in medicine that chemical compounds could affect the brain was still new and discounted by many psychoanalytically-oriented psychiatrists. In that context the early orthomolecular movement was a forerunner of all of biological psychiatry. The concept as described in the paper by John Hoffer that opens this issue was that brain disorders could be a consequence of genetic mutations leading some individuals to require higher doses of essential nutrients than other people. Such individuals would present with behavioral disorders similar to the well known brain disorders that could be caused in any individual by avitaminosis. The logic of this hypothesis is indisputable; the existence of such cases has still not been proven.

The concept however that natural substances, whether essential nutrients or not, can affect the brain has become increasingly subject to excellent empirical research in recent years. The substances studied have been as varied as the biochemical content of the brain which contains in a "natural state" thousands of distinct chemicals. Many of these could rationally be theorized to have a role in behavior and might be worth testing in animal models of mental disorder and if safe also in patients with mental disorder. If mental illness is the highly heterogeneous result of many different kinds of central biochemical deficiencies, each in a very small number of patients, it could become difficult to prove the efficacy of any one compound in controlled double blind trial of unselected patients with a particular diagnosis. Therefore, future progress will very much depend on individual clinicians all over the world who might find a particular compound helpful in a particular patient and who should thereafter perform an ABA trial and report his results. In this context excessive adherence to a highly specific definition of "orthomolecular psychiatry" could be counterproductive. An analogy might be psychoanalysis which was clearly an innovative and heuristic theory and treatment at its origin but which gradually inspired a plethora of psychotherapies based to varying degrees on childhood learning models and other psychological models of human behavior and behavioral pathology. Those who argue about the definition and purity of psychoanalysis are probably the least influential group within the psychotherapies today. Abram Hoffer, one of the founders of orthomolecular psychiatry in the 1950s, recently received the Dr. Rogers Prize for Excellence in Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Canada, worth $250,000. This is clearly an honor well deserved for his life work of treating patients, his early work on biological psychiatry and his continued heuristic contribution to theories of nutritional aspects of mental disorder. By way of declaration of conflict of interest we should say that one of the undersigned occupies an academic chair in psychiatry endowed partly by the Hoffer family and designed to encourage empirical research into possible nutritional treatments of mental disorder.

We submit that the present issue of the Israel Journal of Psychiatry illustrates the variety of theorizing, animal research and clinical research going on in this field and hints at possible future fruits for the treatment of mental illness. We submit that the future of this field is bright and not dependent on whether the specific term orthomolecular is used or not. Moreover, whether the term orthomolecular psychiatry is used or not does not affect the historic contributions of Dr. Abram Hoffer and orthomolecular psychiatry in the 1950s and after. It is evident that no clear distinction exists between "natural" treatments on the one hand and chemical treatments on the other. All pharmaceutical company products are part of nature and all compounds that exist naturally in the brain can have potential toxicity in particular situations. That the commercial patent system guarantees profit for certain legal categories of compounds that do not spontaneously exist in the biological world does not mean that these compounds obey different biochemical laws than compounds that exist in normal brain function. To

create a "level playing field" it would be desirable for funding agencies to provide special grants for non-patentable compounds, but ultimately the same standards of proof will be required for all treatments in medicine and psychiatry whether psychotherapeutic, chemical or nutritional. We hope the present issue will increase the openness and sophistication of our readers in this field and decrease ideological approaches or blind allegiance. We acknowledge at this point the assistance of the International Schizophrenia Foundation, a group that promotes orthomolecular psychiatry, in funding the symposium whose participants contributed to this volume.

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Guest Editors