

Tekst 8 An obsession with prescribing perfection

Better Than Well:

American Medicine Meets

The American Dream

by Carl Elliott

Norton 357 pp \$26.95

Reviewed by Shannon Brownlee

- 1 In the late 1960s, the pharmaceutical company Sandoz introduced Serentil, a new tranquilizer. Serentil, according to the ad, could ease the “anxiety that comes from not fitting in,” a feeling that practically every person on the planet has undoubtedly experienced. But Sandoz was prevented from tapping this potentially enormous market by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which forced the company to withdraw the drug and issue a statement to the effect that Serentil was not intended for use in everyday, anxiety-provoking situations.
- 2 Thirty years after Serentil flopped, GlaxoSmithKline launched its own ad campaign for Paxil, an antidepressant that could also be used to treat “social phobia.” The company sent out press releases describing the disease, provided reporters with lists of sufferers willing to speak about their condition, and papered bus shelters with posters and the slogan “Imagine Being Allergic to People.” The promotional campaign hardly mentioned the drug, let alone the manufacturer, notes author Carl Elliott, because pharmaceutical companies have learned the lesson of Serentil: if they want to sell a drug that will “take the edge off some sharply uncomfortable aspect of American social life,” as Elliott puts it, they first need to persuade Americans that their discomfort is due to a bona fide medical problem. “SmithKline does not need to sell Paxil,” he writes. “What they need to sell is social phobia.”
- 3 That, in a nutshell, is the pattern of America’s obsession with enhancement technology: drugs and procedures that are supposed to make us more contented, calmer, sexier. In a word, better. “Doctors begin using a new drug or surgical procedure that looks as much like cosmetic intervention ... as a proper medical treatment,” Elliott writes. The technology triggers a heated debate. But in the end, the technology is accepted as a part of ordinary American life.
- 4 The acceptance of enhancement has been aided, says Elliot, by the American devotion to the self. “We tend to see ourselves as the managers of life projects,” writes Elliott, managers who must search for ways to make our lives better, richer, more psychologically healthy. But this notion of life as a project leads to a degree of moral uncertainty, and to the belief that we are solely responsible for the outcome of our endeavors. To that end, we have drafted medicine and technology into the service of having good lives rather than being good people.
- 5 *Better Than Well* is a superbly crafted book. Lucidly written, often funny, it offers a penetrating look at our self-obsessed, over-medicalized, enhancement-addicted society. But Elliott goes further than this. *Better Than Well* also prepares the ground for thinking about the difficult and contentious issues surrounding gene therapy and genetic engineering.
- 6 Bioethicists draw a line between so-called therapeutic technologies, which are deemed moral, and enhancement technologies, which are not. Thus genetic therapy that can cure a disease such as cystic fibrosis is good, but genetic engineering to give a child

greater intelligence is bad. The problem with this construction, as Elliott makes clear, is that the distinction between treatment and enhancement gets a little blurry in a society that has become adept at turning many aspects of ordinary life into medical problems. Is it enhancement to give growth hormone to increase the stature of boys who will achieve below-average height? Or therapy to protect their egos? And once biotechnologists find the genes for stature, will we want to ensure that all our sons are above average and all our daughters do not grow too tall?

- 7 The ability to alter the genes in embryos is coming soon to a culture that sees self-expression and identity as commodities that can be purchased. The implication of this eloquent, disturbing book is that it will be very difficult to stop genetic enhancement, or even slow it down.

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- 1p **28** Which of the following statements is in accordance with the contents of paragraphs 1 and 2?
Serentil had to be taken off the market, because
- A** it did not remedy the social anxiety it was supposed to ease.
 - B** it was not seen as treating a real disorder.
 - C** the advertising campaign for Serentil met with a lot of opposition.
 - D** users of Serentil complained of serious side-effects.
- 1p **29** What does paragraph 2 make clear about the “GlaxoSmithKline” ad campaign?
- A** It concentrated on putting anxiety on the map as a disease.
 - B** It highlighted the wide range of psychological disorders treatable with Paxil.
 - C** It portrayed sufferers from social anxiety who had benefited from Paxil.
 - D** It was not launched until social anxiety had been recognised as a medical condition.
- “The technology triggers a heated debate.” (paragraph 3)
- 1p **30** A debate between which of the following parties?
- A** Advocates and opponents of medical science being taken over by technology.
 - B** People in favour of and people against treatment merely aimed at a happier life.
 - C** People who suffer from social phobia and those who do not.
 - D** Pharmaceutical companies and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.
 - E** The medical profession and pharmaceutical companies.
- 2p **31** Geef van elk van de onderstaande beweringen aan of deze wel of niet in overeenstemming is met de inhoud van alinea 4.
- 1 Americans tend to hold themselves accountable if they do not lead successful lives.
 - 2 Becoming a better person is part of America’s obsession with perfection.
 - 3 Many Americans see tranquillisers as a relief from the pressures of work.
 - 4 Present-day American medical science seems hardly interested anymore in ordinary diseases.
- Noteer het nummer van elke bewering, gevolgd door “wel” of “niet”.
- 1p **32** Which of the following is in accordance with the contents of paragraph 5?
- A** Elliot approves of gene therapy but disapproves of drugs for the purpose of making us happier.
 - B** Elliot argues that gene therapy will gradually replace medication.
 - C** Elliot extends his reasoning about enhancement technology to the field of gene therapy.

- 1p **33** What does paragraph 6 make clear about the distinction that bioethicists have made?
- A** It can generate useful guidelines for tackling tricky moral questions.
 - B** It does not prevent them from constantly shifting their position.
 - C** It has led to a great deal of argument among scientists.
 - D** It is not always applicable to developments in medical practice.
- 1p **34** Which of the following sums up the reviewer's attitude towards enhancement technology?
It is
- A** controversial but promising.
 - B** worrying but unavoidable.
 - C** wrongly ignored but irreversible.