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# DIRECTIONS in Education

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## Depressing Medicalisation

IN ever-increasing numbers, school students are being placed on medication for depression. Many are in crisis and considered to be at serious risk of self-harm. Some refuse to attend school while others hope that a change of school will bring them salvation. Teachers are often asked to act as confidential referees in a bid to secure a place in a competing school. With the best interests of the student at heart, most agree without hesitation. As a consequence, some will feel disloyal by actively assisting a student to leave their school without first informing the principal. The new school, quite understandably, may not have been informed of the depressive illness. What right does a teacher have to divulge such information? Are they negligent if they do or professionally dishonest if they don't? Welcome to teaching in a post-Prozac age.

Depression is an enormous societal problem. Eighteen million Americans are depressed. In the United Kingdom, one in every six people is depressed. In Australia, one in every five people will suffer from a depressive illness at some stage during their life. The majority will be treated with a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor or SSRI.

*'Studies show that after Prozac was launched in Australia in 1990, prescriptions for antidepressants soared. Between 1990 and 2002, use of SSRIs rose by an annual rate of 13.4 per cent. 20.4 million prescriptions for SSRIs were written between 2003 and 2005' (Age, 19/5/07: Insight 3).*

*'One of the reasons depression looks like it's on the rise is because more people are talking about it, but there are no figures that support a sudden increase, says Dr Nicole Highet, the deputy chief executive of Beyond Blue' (ibid).*

Without doubt, depression is an illness that needs to be treated. But are our GPs too hasty in prescribing antidepressants to school children? Might it be better, in many instances, to treat depressed young people psychologically through counselling rather than pharmacologically with drugs? Are the drug companies that manufacture and market antidepressants placing profit before patient wellbeing? Or are we all guilty in seeking to dispose of another social problem by medicalising it?

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