

Drugs: A Very Short Introduction
Leslie Iversen

The book gives a non-technical account of how drugs work in the body. During the twentieth century the introduction of new medicines for the treatment of infections, heart disease, cancer, mental illnesses and the oral contraceptive have altered all of our lives. Both legal (alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine) and illegal recreational drugs are also reviewed.

- Now that many major diseases of the past have been controlled or eradicated by drugs and vaccines have we become complacent about their ability to strike back?
- Some opponents of the use of animals in medical research argue that we already have all the medicines that we need, and new ones simply make money for pharmaceutical companies – are they right?
- Until recently British policy on drug misuse and addiction has focussed on “harm reduction”. The new Coalition Government focuses more on recovery and complete abstinence as the goals of drugs policy – are they right?
- Californians may approve the legalization of cannabis – if they do will the rest of the world follow suit?
- What should we do about the new phenomenon of “legal highs”?
- Why does it take on average twenty years for a new laboratory discovery, (e.g. the human genome) to become translated into real advances in patient care?
- Will it ever be possible to develop new medicines without using research animals?
- There are many “alternative” approaches to medical treatment – some argue that most of these work by means of a “placebo” effect – are they right?
- The caffeine in coffee and cola drinks can be addictive – are all drugs of addiction harmful?
- Do age-related disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease represent the single most important challenge for the 21st Century?
- Some drugs can make people capable of sustaining long periods of active “brain work” – should such “cognition enhancers” be controlled – and if so why?
- Is there a danger that we will run out of effective treatments to infections or serious illnesses such as malaria as tolerance to existing medicines develops?
- Have the drugs used to treat psychiatric disorders really benefited patients, or do they merely serve as chemical coshes or cushions?
- Why did it take so long for society to recognise the dangers of tobacco - when the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer was reported more than sixty years ago?
- Was the discovery of aspirin in the nineteenth century the single most important advance ever made in the development of drugs treating human disease?
- Why do humans find intoxicant drugs so attractive, and why do they sometimes persist in using them knowing that they are causing harm?

Further reading

Berridge, V and Edwards, G (1981) *Opium and the People* (St Martin Press London, Allen Lane, 1998)

Huxley, A *The Doors of Perception* (Chatto and Windus, London)

Healey, D. *The Antidepressant Era*, (Mass, US, Harvard University Press, 1999)

Stone, T and Darlington, *Pills, Potions and Poisons: How Drugs Work*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000)

Karlen, A. *A Plagues Progress: a Social history of Man and Disease*, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1995)