addiction by prescription

One woman’s triumph and fight for change

Joan E. Gadsby

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denial, ignorance, apathy and neglect have created a worldwide health epidemic of “accidental addicts.” And I was one of them.

On Feb. 2, 1990, I almost died from an unintentional prescription drug overdose. Four months later, I was trying to read Barbara Gordon’s best-selling *I’m Dancing As Fast As I Can*, but no matter how hard I tried, the words jumbled and the lines ran together. I read and reread, unable to concentrate. (I later found out this was symptomatic of cognitive damage from addiction to drugs.) Despite my difficulties, Gordon’s story of her problems while taking tranquilizers, her drug-induced breakdown and her bizarre and harrowing experiences during a “cold-turkey” withdrawal from Valium triggered memories of my own horrific past and confirmed my decision to free myself of all prescription drugs.

Six weeks earlier—without medical supervision since none was available—I had begun to discontinue the tranquilizers and sleeping pills prescribed to me for 20 years by my former, trusted doctor. The pills were benzodiazepines (Librium, Valium, Dalmane, Restoril, Serax and Ativan)—all addictive, representing a serious and insidiously hidden, worldwide health epidemic affecting millions of people who have become “accidental addicts.” World Health Organization research reveals that benzodiazepines are the most frequently prescribed drugs and remain the biggest sellers in the history of medicine, with current annual sales of $21 billion. I was given my first pill after my son, Derek, four, died of a brain tumour Christmas 1966.

**Slow recovery**

Once off the drugs, I thought my life would get better compared to the turmoil and unpredictability that had previously affected my health, family and career. I didn’t know then that the time to follow would be terrifying, uncertain and financially devastating. It would take years to regain my physical, mental and emotional health. Today, my financial future still remains uncertain.

During withdrawal, scarcely able to swallow, I lost more than 20 pounds from living on milk and bananas for two weeks. It's a promise I keep: to run every day as I have for years. Jogging allows me to release pent-up energy and stress, reminding me to live in the present instead of wondering what will happen in the future. It's a reminder I’ve learned to cherish.
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months. I endured severe paranoia, agoraphobia, psychomotor difficulties, hallucinations, visual distortions, panic attacks, headaches and painful flashbacks of my life and my son’s death. As my body detoxified, I realized all my senses and emotions had been progressively suppressed by the drugs.

I was fearful for months and slept one hour a night. For years, scarcely a day passed that I didn’t think I was going to die. I had no choice but to leave my career indefinitely and go on long-term disability.

Besides my love for my two daughters, Deb and Carrie, my career had always been a major focus in my life, and for more than 25 years, I had worked for four of Canada’s largest companies in senior-level marketing management, corporate planning, public affairs, government relations, and property planning and development. I was a poll-topping councillor in my community for 13 years. Yet, in 1993, I also left behind my political responsibilities.

Day by day
Living alone, I recorded my thoughts, informing my daughters that, if I died, they should retrieve the tapes and listen to try and understand what had happened. I was filled with fear and uncertainty. Was I going to get better? How was I going to cope financially? I felt so vulnerable—reduced to a frightened child focused on daily survival. It didn’t help that I discovered there was little medical help available. Among doctors, I found widespread denial, ignorance and apathy about prescription addiction.

As my body detoxified and my awareness grew, I faced painful memories of strange and embarrassing behaviours that I had shown during my addiction. I had gone into frequent, irrational rages, sometimes ending up in jail or the hospital. A public figure, my escapades hit the newspapers, causing my family and me extraordinary humiliation. I was haunted by several earlier overdoses. I had everything to live for, had never wanted to take my own life, yet swallowed pills without realizing their significance or linking my actions to side-effects. I found out later that these benzodiazepine drugs create “suicidal ideation.” The overdose in early 1990 was, thank God, the last.

As months passed and I regained my senses, I was overwhelmed by the intricacy and beauty in everyday things. For the first time in 20 years, I saw details in clouds, pistils and stamens in flowers, vivid oranges and reds of sunsets, and the moon and stars. I live in a neighbourhood below Grouse Mountain in North Vancouver, BC. Driving toward Vancouver one day, I saw the top half of the skyline for the first time in years. It was exciting to see a whole new world emerging. I felt reborn and yet, at the same time, had intense feelings of loss and sadness for all I had missed over the years and for our dysfunctional home.

Searching for truth
Throughout withdrawal, as my awareness increased, my anger and disillusionment with doctors and the drug-based medical system grew. I began a concerted investigation of the history, medical facts and research surrounding benzodiazepines and other similarly addictive prescription drugs, including antidepressants. My search began in my North Shore community and extended worldwide.

I found that the deleterious and paradoxical effects of benzodiazepines, prescribed both short term and long term, had been known, researched and documented since the 1960s. Why then hadn’t doctors understood what was happening to me? Not once in 20 years did a doctor identify the real problem. At no time did I give “informed consent” to the drugs. Nor would I have, had I known what I know now. It seemed incredible that there was still ignorance, denial and apathy concerning not only the dire side-effects of these highly addictive drugs, but also the severe and protracted withdrawal from which people suffer when they try to stop.

Off to court
In 1992, still on disability and financial
times the problem and affects up to an estimated 30 per cent of adults, is evident. Education and awareness-building initiatives to change doctors’ entrenched prescribing habits and create informed use by patients are limited. There are few knowledgeable and proven withdrawal methods, resources and treatment facilities for people wanting to cease long-term use and for protracted recovery, which can last months and years.

Why is the medical community today (with the exception of a few doctors who are not afraid to “buck the system”) unwilling to address this serious and preventable doctor-induced worldwide health epidemic? Research released in 2001 by Columbia University revealed that fewer than 30 per cent of doctors know how to diagnose prescription drug addiction.

I sincerely believe God kept me alive through many close calls and my last unintentional overdose in 1990 to carry this important message. Today I feel like a teenager. It’s as though I have started my life all over. I’m full of energy, passion and purpose. Attention to a healthy lifestyle—lots of fresh air, healthy food, a daily run/walk along the West Vancouver seawall, a positive attitude, a proactive approach to my health including nutritional supplements—and

Neuropsychological tests confirmed that my intellectual functioning was impaired and, in 1994, I began an intensive cognitive retraining program and learning of new coping skills to deal with my “deficits.”

My international research expanded to more than 2,000 research papers, abstracts and books published since the late 1960s. I interviewed thousands worldwide and, in 1995, connected with the International Victims of Tranquillizers organization in the United Kingdom—a group of “survivors,” 5,000 of whom had also initiated lawsuits for negligence against doctors, drug companies and health organizations. And I shared my experiences and findings in a book entitled Prescription by Addiction.

**Raising awareness**

While much attention is given to illegal drugs, little acknowledgement of prescription drug addiction, which is 10 quality of their lives, save millions of dollars for our dwindling health-care system and affect long overdue systemic change.

Joan Gadsby’s passion to save lives, create awareness and share her experience and research has included co-executive production of a television documentary Our Pill Epidemic—The Shocking Story of a Society Hooked on Drugs, which aired nationally, and her internationally endorsed book Addiction by Prescription (Key Porter Books, 2001). Both are available on her Web site addictionbyprescription.com.