Letter to the Editor
AACAP Response

Drugged as Children, Foster-Care Alumni Speak Out
Wall Street Journal, (Feb.23, 2014)
http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303442704579361333470749104

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I appreciate your drawing attention to the inequities often associated with the mental health treatment received by children in foster care.

Numerous studies document that up to 80% of foster children have been exposed to adverse biological and psychosocial risk factors including prevalence of genetically acquired mental illness, extreme violence and maltreatment that put children at increased risk for behavioral, developmental, or psychiatric health problems.

Sadly, most only receive psychiatric care at a crisis point, often receiving inadequate evaluations and fragmented and inconsistent treatment. And unlike children from intact families, foster youth often have no constant guardian to provide informed consent, longitudinal treatment oversight, or coordinate treatment planning and clinical care.

Although medications can be very helpful for carefully selected target symptoms, medication alone is rarely an adequate or appropriate intervention for children with complex psychiatric disorders. Treatment must include consideration of the full range of both psychosocial and psychopharmacologic interventions.

When our society’s child welfare agencies take the drastic step of removing children from their families, they (and we) must ensure that the outcome is better than the alternative of leaving them where they were; in medicine, the adage is “first do no harm”. Those of us who work with such children have an obligation to adhere to the practice standards we know to be right.

We can no longer afford to let this vulnerable population slip through the cracks.

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