

Neuroethicist argues for continuing research into memory dampening drugs

August 24 2011, by Bob Yirka

(Medical Xpress) -- Unafraid to stir up a hornet's nest of controversy, Adam Kolber, a Brooklyn Law School professor has published an essay on *Nature* declaring that he believes it's time the debate over whether to continue research into pharmaceuticals that can alter, dampen or erase memories should end. He says that it's clear, at least to him, that the benefits of such drugs would far outweigh the negatives and that research should move full speed ahead so that those who suffer the negative effects of bad memories can get on with their lives in ways they would have had the bad thing they remember never occurred.

Others are not so quick to agree. Some suggest that such drugs could alter a person's personality, denying them the life they would have lived had they not taken the drug. Others suggest that such drugs could be used for illicit purposes, such as being dispensed to people who have witnessed a crime. Kolber rebukes such fears declaring that there are already laws on the books in most countries disallowing the use of drugs for such purposes; though his argument may be weak here. In the instance where criminals are dispensing such drugs, it's doubtful they'd concern themselves much about the legality, much less the ethics of forcing a witness to their nefarious activities to take a pill to forget what they'd seen. Some might even call this an improvement on the status quo as the alternative now is for the bad guys to simply kill those that have seen what has gone on.

As for such drugs altering the makeup of a person or changing their personality; Kolber argues that if a drug were developed that could target

and remove a single [memory](#), such as a traumatic event, giving a person that drug would actually allow them to live the life they would have led otherwise, thus, allowing them to retain the personality they were meant to have, but were denied due to a horrible experience.

The issue of whether to press on with such research has become more of a practicality in recent years as enough progress has been made in the lab to suggest that memory erasing drugs could soon become a reality. We already have such drugs as Propranolol which can block memory-strengthening brain chemicals, and has even been used in at least one such circumstance; that of a cancer patient who overheard her diagnosis accidentally and was given the drug by an anesthesiologist to remove the memory, and thus the trauma of what she'd heard.

Kolber also notes in his essay that it seems a bit premature to decry the use of memory dampening drugs in light of the obvious positive impact such drugs could have for people suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome after returning from war, or less dramatically, from nightmares after an assault. He points out that such drugs would of course be given by prescription only, and thus could be regulated like any other drug, making them just as safe as drugs that are used to relieve physical pain.

More information: Neuroethics: Give memory-altering drugs a chance, *Nature* 476, 275–276 (18 August 2011) [doi:10.1038/476275a](https://doi.org/10.1038/476275a)

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