

February 15, 2014

Honorable Senators:

My name is Joshua Sawyer. I've been in the mental health system for 29 years. I understand you'll be voting on a bill, S.287, that would make it take less time to medicate people against their will. In my experience there's already too little choice. Even when you're supposedly voluntary, you are powerless.

I was first hospitalized in January 1985, when I was sixteen. When I panicked from realizing I was on a locked ward I was held down and shot up with Thorazine. It was such a massive dose I couldn't even urinate for a few days and I thought I was dying or on the verge of death. By the time I left the hospital I'd been prescribed lithium and told I'd have to take it for the rest of my life. Lithium slowed down my thoughts so much, I thought I'd become stupid. Both drugs made me want to kill myself.

Within a year I was manic again. I signed myself back into the hospital because I had nowhere else to go. I was given a big shot of Haldol in the posterior without anyone even telling me what it was or what it would do. I know now that Haldol can damage the brain and can only guess how much damage it's done to mine with the high doses used to bring me down from manic episodes. I called it "the zombie drug" because on it, all I was capable of doing was sleeping, and even in sleep it caused me severe pain. If I knew about the drug, I would have surely refused. But I wasn't given any information at all.

When I was 18, I was in Central Vermont Hospital with another manic episode. I was given Mellaril. It gave me an "EPILEPTIC SEIZURE". I had painful, uncontrollable movements and facial tics that were horrible to experience. I didn't know what was happening and no one told me. Ten years later, looking through my medical records, I found out it was a drug-induced seizure. I am appalled that no one at the hospital told me what was happening at the time.

In 1994 I was in a community crisis bed for another manic episode. I was told that if I didn't take a dangerous medication called Clozapine I'd be sent to the state hospital. So I said "Fine, send me to the state hospital" because I'd heard about the adverse effects. At VSH I was eventually told I couldn't leave unless I took Clozapine. I believe this kind of coercion is illegal, but I didn't know it then. I had an infant son with autism, whose mother needed my help caring for him. So I reluctantly agreed to take the Clozapine. And because I had to do this for my son's sake, I am now stuck with a medication so dangerous (DEATH IS A KNOWN SIDE EFFECT) that I have to take the bus to the hospital every month to get blood draws and then ensure the results get to my pharmacy, which causes me lots of stress as often the results get messed up. If I don't do this I can't get this medication. I absolutely hate that I have to take it!

Vomiting is a side effect of Clozapine. One time it got so bad I went to Central

Vermont Hospital for help. They put me on the psych unit and abruptly took me of all my medication. That made me become very manic. Then they kept shooting me up with more drugs, without any explanation and without my consent. I finally demanded to leave, and they threatened to discharge me without any medication. I only got out after an advocate came to the hospital and confronted them.

Clozapine is such strong medication that I'm forced to sleep much of the day. I also believe it's affected my memory and helped give me a condition called "OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER" which means I have to check my stove, lights, door-locks and every thing in my house obsessively, over and over, before I can leave it, and which eats into my remaining time awake.

Between the Clozapine and the OCD, it's difficult for me to work. Besides monitoring and worrying about what the drug may be doing to my bone marrow, I think about how can affect my cholesterol level and blood pressure (both higher than average for my age) or lead to diabetes. I wonder how many years it may be taking off my life. I think about how difficult it makes it to have and keep friends, and how it helps keep me in what will probably be life-long poverty. And how hard, perhaps impossible, it is to get off this drug once you're on it.

I know from what I've been through that people should be aware and informed of what drugs do before taking them, and have a choice to refuse if they want to avoid negative side-effects (and sometimes purposeful effects!) that can mess up or even destroy your life! I wish that I'd been aware that I did have a choice (although in many situations I clearly didn't). Mostly what these drugs have done is make me endlessly wonder what my life would have been like if I didn't have to take them.

I do not want anyone else to go through what I've been through. Please allow people to have a choice in whether to take or refuse these potentially harmful drugs.

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