

**“A View from the Trenches,”
by Craig Sweets**

Dear Committee Members,

As a person suffering with a severe mental illness, I **oppose** Senate Bill 123, which seeks to limit or eliminate a formerly “protected” class of medications. The proposal, if approved by lawmakers, will drastically cut back on the types and varieties of medications which people suffering day by day need to allow them to flourish as functioning members of society.

Do we really want more people with mental illnesses in institutions (which would result in a greater expense than the price of medication for a month), or worse, wandering the streets of our communities? The generics may be cheaper, but at what cost to those who need the brand-name medications? Even the price of generic medications put them out of the reach of many. People with mental illnesses should have the same access to their medicines that those with physical illnesses have. Imagine, having to go without insulin as a diabetic, or to go without simple vaccines for childhood diseases? The explanation comes down to stigma – we can see a broken leg, but not a broken brain. And people choose not to sympathize with what they cannot see, though the brain is every much a part of the body as a leg is.

Do we really want to return to the days of the “first generation” neuroleptics (e.g. Haldol, Thorazine, and Navane), which beside their relative ineffectiveness, have awful side effects such as stiffness and drooling, dystonic reactions and flat emotions? I have experienced these side-effects first-hand – for a whole year I was put on these “first generation” neuroleptics, felt little or no joy, until a doctor put me on Risperdal and Clozaril (two of the “new generation” of medicines), whereupon I began to feel I had my life back. These “new generation” of medications have been a Godsend; indeed, I felt almost that I was like Lazarus rising from the dead, with my sense of renewal and coming back to life. While today I continue to face some symptoms, life is bearable and even joyful again.

It is vital that our elected officials pass laws that will bring healing to and understanding of an often vulnerable and misunderstood population. The truth is, the vast majority of mentally ill people are vulnerable, not dangerous. The reality is, Haldol does as much good for the sufferer of a severe mental illness as a cold bath or a straightjacket did for Ophelia. My plea is that the people we put into office will make the educated, if not the most popular decision. In this case, the popular vote is to think only of the money saved by limiting or eliminating a whole class of helpful medications –but at what cost? Voting with the conscience may not result in money saved, but it will result in human lives saved. Accordingly, I urge you to vote against SB 123. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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