

# A Different Kind of Drug War

By Kelly Patricia O'Meara

**A school-board member's resolution calling for a higher standard of care when prescribing mind-altering drugs for schoolchildren has erupted in controversy in Colorado.**

**P**atti Johnson, a Republican representing the congressional 2nd District on the Colorado State Board of Education, watched the tragic events unfolding last April at Columbine High School in Littleton on CNN with the rest of the nation. She only could imagine the terror the children were experiencing, and her heart ached for parents who were praying that their child would escape unharmed.

Far too many of those prayers went unanswered. And, in the aftermath of the tragedy, another in what now is a

long line of bloody schoolhouse shootings, the nation struggles to find answers for why such violence has been occurring. Johnson long had suspected a connection between violence and the children for whom psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs have been prescribed, but it wasn't until the tragedy at Columbine High that she made the decision to act on that suspicion. Soon after the massacre tests revealed that, contrary to popular presumption, the teen-age Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were not taking illegal drugs. Rather, tests from the autopsy on Har-

ris showed therapeutic levels of the psychotropic drug Luvox (Fluvoxamine), one of the new selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs, commonly prescribed for obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, and depression (see "Doping Kids," June 28). This news increased Johnson's concern that there might be a connection.

In an effort to increase awareness about the possible adverse effects of psychotropic drugs and to "provide information that could help schools and parents make sound decisions about the health and welfare of students," Johnson says, she began gathering scientific background and data about the psychotropic drugs most likely to be prescribed for schoolchildren diagnosed with such alleged mental disorders as attention deficit disorder, or ADD, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. Johnson believes all sides of the issue should be explored and says that "if we're going to say our schools are safe learning environments and we don't look at these drugs, then we're being hypocrites."

In October, Johnson submitted a related four-page resolution during the working session of the State Board of Education and encouraged other board members to offer amendments. Throughout the month changes were offered concerning wording of the resolution, and a consensus developed. The meat of the final one-page resolution is in its last three statements, which follow:

*WHEREAS: only medical personnel can recommend the use of prescription medications; and,*

*WHEREAS: the Colorado State Board of Education recognizes that there is much concern regarding the issue of appropriate and thorough diagnosis and medications and their impact on student achievement; and*

*WHEREAS: there are documented incidents of highly negative consequences in which psychiatric prescription drugs have been utilized for what are essentially problems of discipline which may be related to lack of academic success....*

By a 6-1 vote in mid-November the Colorado State Board of Education adopted Johnson's resolution. Gully Stanford, a Democrat, was the only member of the board to dissent. While Stanford was concerned about many aspects of the resolution, he was most

**Still waters:** Johnson led the effort by the Colorado State School Board to get answers about psychotropic drugs.



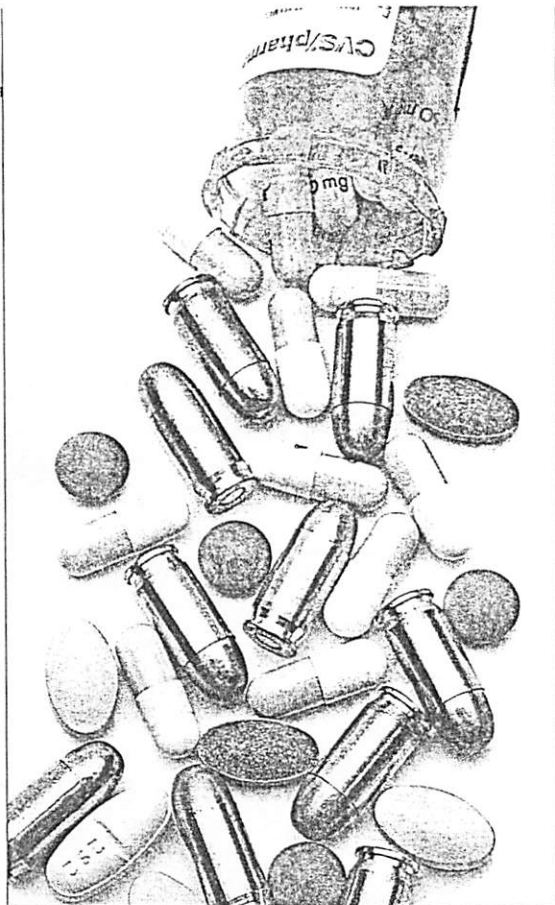
uncomfortable with the suggestion that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between violence and psychotropic drugs. "I think," he says, "there was such a presupposition on the part of the sponsor that there is overmedication and a connection between violence and these drugs that it ruled out any discussion of what is really needed — a passionate and balanced study of the issue. The way the resolution was presented precluded a balanced discussion."

Stanford based his opposition on what he believes are three flawed premises: widespread abuse in diagnosis and medication of students; rampant overdiagnosis and overmedication; and direct causality between violent behavior and psychotropic drugs.

At any time during the monthlong process, Stanford could have submitted amendments and called experts to testify before the board, but he held his objections until the day before the board was scheduled to vote on the resolution. When he finally brought in opponents to address the board, no one but Stanford was convinced by their data and the resolution was overwhelmingly adopted. According to Johnson, "Stanford could have requested a vote by the board to delay the final consideration of the resolution, but he did not take advantage of the option available to him and the vote went on as scheduled. For him to complain that the process was unfair is simply untrue. He knows the rules of the board and could have begun participating in the process long before the day of the vote."

Stanford cried foul and, driven to paroxysms of fury, others raised ad hominem arguments about the religious affiliation of one of the speakers who supported Johnson's resolution. For instance, Kyle Sargent, director of public policy for the Mental Health Association of Colorado, tells *Insight*, "Look at Bruce Weisman. Is there an ulterior motive with him? If you have a religion that is against psychiatry should they be taken seriously?"

Sargent is referring to the fact that Weisman, president of the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, or CCHR, a California-based organization that investigates violations of human rights by mental-health practitioners, is a member of the Church of Scientology. Weisman tells *Insight*



**Johnson: 'If we're going to say our schools are safe learning environments and we don't look at these drugs then we're being hypocrites.'**

that "the organization was founded by the church in 1969 but has for years been funded by private donors. All funds received by CCHR are contributions from individual donors — both Scientologists and non-Scientologists."

"Clearly this is an effort to attack the messenger and avoid the message," Weisman continues. "This isn't a religious issue. The issue is about millions of kids being put on psychotropic drugs. For them to try and muddy the waters by bringing religion into the mix is their attempt to divert attention from the real issue. These guys are so vulnerable that when you challenge them on drugging little children they hit new lows by attacking the next guy's religion. If they want to

legitimately challenge our data and our science, be our guest. We welcome it. Everything we say can be documented because it's the truth, not a public-relations statement."

Johnson is amazed that medical professionals would resort to religious bigotry. "In no way did I ever think that the CCHR was pushing their ideas on me," she says. "No part of this resolution has anything to do with religious beliefs. My opponents are attacking this because they can't fight the science that supports my belief that there is a connection between the psychotropic drugs and violence. Because one of many speakers was a member of the Church of Scientology, my opponents have twisted this into a religious thing. That is ridiculous. All we're trying to say is that this is a warning that teachers [and] nonmedical professionals should stay within their academic boundaries and expertise and not pressure parents to put a child on a medication. It has absolutely nothing to do with

anyone's religion."

Johnson and the rest of the State Board of Education aren't the only elected officials interested in the well-being of the children of Colorado. Nor are they the only targets of personal attacks for their efforts to raise questions that advocates of psychotropic drugs apparently don't want asked.

Republican state Rep. Penn Pfiffner — who represents Jefferson County, the home of Columbine High School — in mid-November chaired a hearing on the possible connection of violent behavior and psychotropic drugs. Rather than applaud Pfiffner for carefully investigating a tough issue, local press reports called the hearings "the big top over the circus," and labeled Pfiffner the "ringmaster in charge." Pfiffner wasn't distracted. "If we're only interested in debating gun laws and metal detectors," says Pfiffner, "then we as legislators aren't doing our job." Raising this issue, Pfiffner continues, "has unleashed a firestorm and a backlash from people who think they already have the answers. It's just the beginning, though. We have allowed both sides to offer their points of view and the next step may be to bring in health-care professionals to help decide what guidelines and policies are appropriate, if any."

Pfiffner is determined to get to the bottom of the problem. "There is

enough coincidence and enough professional opinion from legitimate scientists to cause us to raise the issue and to ask further questions. I'm going to proceed with an open mind and a great deal of uncertainty to get to the bottom of whether there is or is not a connection here."

Ann Tracy, a doctor of psychology and health sciences and founder and president of the International Coalition for Drug Awareness ([www.drugawareness.com](http://www.drugawareness.com)) isn't surprised by the tactics being used by advocates of psychotropics to deflect attention away from what she believes to be a life-and-death threat. Tracy, an expert on SSRIs who for nearly 10 years has testified in dozens of criminal cases involving psychotropic drugs, doesn't pull any punches. "When it comes to drugs like Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil and Luvox, I've never seen a group of drugs so similar to PCP and LSD. Ritalin also has a strong effect on serotonin levels in the brain, but it no longer is the drug of choice for ADD and ADHD but rather is being replaced by the new SSRIs. The information about these drugs has been in medical literature for decades."

As an expert witness, says Tracy, "I was asked to go before the board and explain what psychotropics are and how they may adversely affect someone. The SSRIs can create mania and psychotic episodes. Luvox, the psychotropic drug prescribed to Eric Harris, suppresses the REM state or dream state [of sleep], which is critical to good mental health. These drugs allow a person to be awake but at any time they can slip into the REM state. This is why people often discuss how they couldn't tell the difference between the dream and reality. These drugs are horribly damaging to the entire system."

Tracy has done extensive research about psychotropic drugs and violence. "In investigating 30 cases that took place over the last four years of something extremely rare before, but becoming much more common — women committing murder and then attempting suicide — there is an alarming link. Out of the 30 cases of mothers killing their children or their husbands and then themselves, 22 were on SSRI medications at the time of the murder."

Tracy's research also has delved into the growing number of school-age children who have exhibited violent behavior while taking psychotropic drugs. She has been called in as a consultant on several disturbing cases: a 15-year-old boy on Zoloft for five days shot and killed a woman and now is serving life in prison; a 17-year-old boy on Paxil for three months was killed when he jumped off an overpass and into the path of a trailer truck; a 14-year-old girl put on Paxil to deal with the death of her father (who had been on Paxil for three weeks before killing himself) drank Drano in a suicide attempt; and a 16-year-old boy on

classes. And in those situations it is standard procedure to put the kids on drugs.

"I'd love to know what Dylan Klebold was on," Tracy continued. "I would have no problem testifying in court to the fact that the psychotropic drug Harris was taking played a role in why he did the shooting. When all of this is over and we count up the dead, we're going to be in shock. We've got to stop drugging our kids," she concludes.

Tracy believes that Johnson's resolution and the courage demonstrated by the board supporting it is a huge first step in a long process of raising awareness about the possible adverse effects of the SSRIs. "I'm hoping," says Tracy, "that the rest of the country will sit up and take notice and do something in their communities. The Colorado State Board of Education has set the example for the rest to follow."

Many critics say it is past time to pay attention. In Bismarck, N.D., just 10 days after husband and father Ryan Ehlis began taking Adderall (the new replacement for Ritalin) for his diagnosed ADD, he killed his 5-week-old daughter with a shotgun and then turned the weapon on himself. He survived and was tried for the murder of his infant daughter. Judge Debbie Kleven agreed with psychiatrists who testified that the horrible crime resulted solely from the psychotic state caused by the prescription psychotropic drug and Ehlis was acquitted. Despite the fact that the drug's labeling warns that in very rare

circumstances it can cause "psychotic episodes at recommended doses," nearly 3 million people this year have been prescribed Adderall.

"I don't care what it takes," says Johnson of her effort to investigate the link between bizarre violence and the mass medication of schoolchildren and others with psychotropic drugs. "These kids are our future and we've got to do something now. It's unbelievable how we're being attacked, but I don't regret for one minute that I raised this issue."

Meanwhile, in Denver, the *Rocky Mountain News* has been conducting a poll about Johnson's resolution. A few days into the poll, 96 percent of those responding supported taking a hard look at whether there is a connection between psychotropic drugs and violence. ●

STATE OF COLORADO

COLORADO STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION  
271 East Colfax Avenue  
Denver, CO 80202  
303-733-6417

COLORADO STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

RESOLUTION: PROMOTING THE USE OF ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS WITH BEHAVIOR, ATTENTION, AND LEARNING

WHEREAS, the Colorado State Board of Education is constitutionally charged with the general supervision of K-12 public education; and

WHEREAS, the Colorado State Board of Education dedicates itself to increasing academic achievement levels for all students; and

WHEREAS, the responsibility of school personnel is to ensure student achievement; and

WHEREAS, only medical personnel can recommend the use of prescription medication; and

WHEREAS, the State Board of Education recognizes that there is much concern regarding the issue of appropriate and thorough diagnosis and medication and their impact on student achievement; and

WHEREAS, there are documented incidents of highly negative consequences in which psychiatric prescription drugs have been utilized for what are essentially problems of discipline which may be related to lack of academic success;

BE IT RESOLVED that the State Board of Education encourage school personnel to use proven academic and/or classroom management solutions to resolve behavior, attention, and learning difficulties; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the State Board of Education encourage greater communication and education among parents, educators, and medical professionals about the effects of psychotropic drugs on student achievement and our ability to provide a safe and civil learning environment.

Adopted 11/11/99

**The resolution: Board wants to know if psychotropic drugs are behind growing school violence.**

Paxil for five days stabbed a woman more than 60 times and then drove his car at a high speed into a cement abutment in a failed suicide attempt. He now is serving life in prison.

"In each of these cases," says Tracy, "individuals close to them were shocked at the violent and destructive behavior because it was so out of character for them."

Although Tracy has conducted no investigation into the shooting incident at Columbine, she is nevertheless curious about the medical background of the shooters. "Both Harris and Klebold," says Tracy, "reportedly attended the same anger-management