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A heavy weight: Depression, SSRIs, and the phenomenology of the heart

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Summary

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the most common antidepressants used to treat depression. However, they can adversely affect the heart. Three SSRIs in particular cause cardiac problems: Citalopram, Sertraline, and Paroxetine. Citalopram can alter signals to the heart's natural pacemaker, which is located in the upper wall of the right atrium. Sertraline can lower serotonin activity in the mitral valve. Paroxetine can cause lower recovery rate from a heart attack. Certain drugs must be evaluated more to determine if it is suitable to be prescribed to treat depression.

Keywords: *citalopram, depression, heart, paroxetine, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), sertraline*

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INTRODUCTION

In response and continuation to Gruica's paper (Gruica, 2026), I argue that depression is a heavy burden to carry, especially in the heart. Many patients complain of a "heavy heart," an "empty feeling," or a "broken heart." When it comes to treating patients, "pharmacotherapy has shown to be an effective treatment... with [over] 21 drugs having been approved by the Food and Drug Administration for the treatment of depression based on double-blind, placebo-controlled studies" (Fava, 2000). However, certain drugs such as citalopram, sertraline, and paroxetine carry a high risk for heart problems. This paper will evaluate the phenomenology of heart problems "caused" by depression and show how these drugs can adversely affect the heart's anatomy.

BODY

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the most popular class of antidepressants and are "often used as first-line pharmacotherapy for depression..." (Chu, 2023). Despite this, they have adverse side effects, including fatal arrhythmia. SSRIs can take up to six weeks before potential effects occur. Studies and clinical tests on SSRIs are needed to "subsequently avoid life-threatening cardiovascular adverse effects due to depression treatment" (Yekehtaz, 2013).

The novel *Where the Blue Begins* dictates that "heavy hearts, like heavy clouds in the sky, are best relieved by the letting of a little water" (Morley, 1922). Heavy hearts are often associated with depression, and instead of just letting out a good cry, patients are prescribed medicines like SSRIs to treat it. A drug that is given to treat depression is Citalopram. This drug is known to have "the highest cardiotoxic capacity in a dose-dependent fashion" (Yekehtaz, 2013). Citalopram blocks the inward rectifier potassium channels in the heart, which can cause QT-corrected prolongation and development of arrhythmia. The cause of a "heavy heart" stems from a condition called bradycardia where the heart beats too slowly and does not pump enough oxygen-rich blood. The "heavy" feeling in the chest is the body's fatigued response to a lack of oxygen.

The novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* says that "the heart dies a slow death, shedding each hope like leaves until one day, there are none. No hopes. Nothing remains" (Golden, 1997). This is how many patients with an "empty feeling" put their depression into words. When all hope seems lost, they turn to medicine to help them recover. Sertraline is an SSRI that is prescribed to patients with depression. However, "a large-scale randomized placebo-controlled clinical trial showed that Sertraline administration was... not efficient for improving depression" (Yekehtaz, 2013). Another downside to the drug is its adverse effects on the heart. Sertraline releases chemicals to lower serotonin transporter (SERT) activity in the heart's mitral valve and can cause severe mitral regurgitation. This happens when the valve does not close tight, forcing the heart to work much harder to pump blood and can potentially lead to heart failure. Studies have found that "impairing serotonin function... is neither necessary nor sufficient," as "low serotonin function may compromise

mechanisms involved in maintaining recovery from depression" (Cowen, 2015).

The author of *Anna Karenina* writes in the novel that "her heart was broken. Why would they try to cure her with pills and powders?" (Tolstoy, 1878). Depression sets on after a patient's heart is "broken" by an external circumstance. While this is more of a metaphorical sense, it can become literal if given the wrong medicine. Paroxetine is an SSRI prescribed to treat depression, but it can cause "cardiotoxicity and increased risk of serotonin syndrome" (Nevels, 2016). Paroxetine prevents the mechanism of ventricular remodeling, where the left ventricle of the heart naturally enlarges and declines after a heart attack. One patient that was being treated with this drug "developed unstable angina" (Roose, 1998). When a patient complains of a "broken" heart, if they are given Paroxetine to treat depression, it can break the structural integrity of the heart.

CONCLUSION

The quote from *Anna Karenina* begs the question of why doctors continue to prescribe drugs for depression. In early 2004, the FDA "issued a public health advisory... that recommends close observation of patients taking paroxetine" (Nevels). This is because of its adverse cardiac effects. Citalopram and Sertraline have also been warned of treating depression in patients with heart problems because of its side effects. In studying the heart and its "weight," the causes are more biological than spiritual. Patients with depression should take extra care of which medicines they are taking to relieve this burden off of their chest.

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