

# **Report of 17 May 2018 Meeting Royal Society Southern Highlands Branch**

**Speaker:** Professor Gordon Parker AO  
Scientia Professor of Psychiatry UNSW  
1918 James Cook Medallist, Royal Society of NSW

**Topic:** An Overview of Depression in our Society: Consideration of the current rates of prescriptions of antidepressants in Australia compared to previous decades.

A community audience of 70 warmly greeted Gordon Parker as he entered the comfortable Joadja/Nattai Conference room at the Mittagong RSL. They had come to hear his latest position on the common administration of antidepressants in our modern society. Much of Professor Parker's earlier research was already familiar to many through his extraordinary numbers of publications and citations in the field of Psychiatry/Psychology. In 2004 he had received a Citation Laureate as the Australian Scientist most highly cited in these specialities.

Professor Parker's opening comments concerned the huge numbers of Australians currently being treated with antidepressants, a distinctive rate increase compared with that of previous generations. In offering reasons for this marked increase, Parker presented a model of the depressive disorders that he argued spring from quite differing biological, psychological (e.g. personality) and social (e.g. loneliness, marital dysfunction) causes – and the relevance or irrelevance of antidepressants as primary or secondary treatments. He then overviewed the debate as to whether antidepressant drugs are more effective or not than placebos.

According to Parker, much of the debate concerning the numerous available treatments of depression has stemmed from the fact that the term “depression” doesn't really say much in and of itself. He made a comparison with the term “breathlessness” which is clearly not a single condition. It could result from the patient running in late to see the doctor, climbing a high mountain, and from asthma, pneumonia, or a pulmonary embolism to name a few. Similarly, the term “depression” is used to cover biologically depressive conditions, conditions caused by stress or personality predisposition, bipolar disorders, non-polar mood disorders and many others. Parker does not support use of the term “depression” as if that were all-explanatory of the huge range of conditions that he sees and treats.

Management of the depressive condition is also problematic, according to Parker. If a person suffering from depression visits a doctor, usually an anti-depressant drug will be prescribed. A visit to a psychologist for the same type of depression will very likely result in cognitive behaviour therapy, while an appointment with a counsellor will result in

counselling as the preferred method of treatment. Parker expressed concern that when a treatment choice is being dictated by the background training or discipline of the practitioner, then it is not consistent with a classical medical approach. Medicine would say for example in the case of breathlessness, “Is it asthma or a pulmonary embolism or is it pneumonia?” and would rightly in turn give a bronchodilator or an anticoagulant or an antibiotic.

The consequences of using the general term “depression” for a huge range of conditions, and then treatment of these conditions according to the background of the practitioner results in both over-treatment and under-treatment according to Parker. People who would benefit from medication because of biological disorders often do not receive medication, and conversely people who do not need medication often receive it.

Many in the audience were surprised to hear that Professor Gordon Parker, as well as publishing prolifically in his academic field, has often stepped successfully into a wider world of publications. His autobiography *A Piece of my Mind: A Psychiatrist on the Couch* was published in 2012. His latest novel *In Two Minds* was published in April 2017, and has a testimonial on the cover by Stephen Fry stating: “I can more or less guarantee that you know someone for whom this book will be important and inspiring. There is a very strong chance that person will be you.”

**Anne Wood FRSN**