Lithium Treatment of Mood Disorders
Mogens Schou

Lithium Treatment of Mood Disorders

A Practical Guide

6th, revised edition
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I wish to thank the patients, relatives, nurses, general practitioners, and psychiatrists who took the time to read and comment on my manuscript.

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Mogens Schou
Foreword by a Psychiatrist

When used correctly, lithium unquestionably produces the most dramatic benefits of any medication used in psychiatry. It is clearly the treatment of choice for many who suffer from bipolar illness, effectively preventing both the manic and the depressed phases of the disorder. The primary aim of this book is to provide patients and their families with up-to-date information about the correct use of lithium – essential knowledge they will require.

When treated with lithium properly, most patients experience nothing unpleasant, but lithium has a potential to induce adverse effects. Thus, a patient who takes lithium without adequate instruction can run into trouble, just as a physician who is not well trained in its use.

Shortly after embarking on lithium prophylaxis over 40 years ago, professor Schou started writing instruction lists for his patients. Thus, this book grew out of enormous experience and out of the conviction that a well-informed patient is a critical element in effective and safe lithium treatment. It also grew out of a marked need to provide a more detailed and comprehensive instruction tool. But the book also expresses the author’s intense compassion and deep respect for those suffering from manic-depressive illness and his profound understanding of their predicament.

Needless to say, professor Schou is extraordinarily well equipped for his task. Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Aarhus and former Director of the Biological Psychiatry Laboratory at the Institute of Psychiatry at Risskov, he has pioneered the systematic use of lithium treatment in mood disorders. When he embarked on this work, psychiatric treatment was literally helpless against the capricious recurrences of manic-depressive illness. Demonstrating lithium’s antimanic effect in the first double-blind trial ever car-
ried out in psychopharmacology and subsequently proving lithium’s prophylactic effect, professor Schou made a crucial contribution to a new era that has since followed. Today, when every paper on bipolar illness opens up stating that it is a recurrent illness and requires long-term treatment, it is hard to believe that prior to professor Schou’s studies, there was no lasting management of the illness. But what was up to that point considered impossible suddenly became attainable: with a relatively simple element to stop the recurrences of a devastating process – manic-depressive illness.

Professor Schou not only discovered the prophylactic effect of lithium but has also remained the driving force behind the effective and safe use of lithium on a worldwide scale. In addition, more than any other work, his research has been responsible for starting the ongoing revolution in biological psychiatry. Reading this practical book for patients, written with the utmost modesty, one would never guess that the author has made such a tremendous contribution to psychiatry over the past 40 years. Because of his unique contribution, he not only received numerous awards and several honorary degrees, but was also nominated for a Nobel Prize.

Writing well for patients is the most challenging literary feat a physician can attempt. Only professor Schou knows how many dozens of drafts of this book have been earlier discarded in order to arrive at the present clarity, poignancy, and precision of writing. But it had to be done that way: well-informed patients and relatives are a critical ingredient of proper lithium treatment.

Because of the plethora of information about lithium spread in the literature, there is clearly a need for a book that reviews this knowledge and information for patients in a comprehensive manner. Professor Schou does an outstanding job in fulfilling this need, and the fact that this book is appearing in its sixth edition attests to it. The book can be best
described as a remarkable compilation of the author’s own extensive clinical and experimental studies over the past 50 years, plus distillation of over 20,000 reports in the literature, all masterfully condensed into about 80 pages.

I believe that every patient who either is or needs to be on lithium should own this guide, and it will be a valuable addition to the libraries of the families who live with manic-depressive illness. Because of its clarity, it will undoubtedly also serve as a useful source of information to physicians and to many healthcare professionals dealing with mood disorders.

Paul Grof, MD, PhD, FRCPC
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Foreword by a Lithium Patient

I met the author of this book when I was a recently diagnosed patient attending a conference on bipolar illness to educate myself. This was during the early 1980s. At that point I had been hospitalized 3 times for psychotic mania and psychotic suicidal depression. I was convinced that life as I had known it was over. A well-meaning psychiatric resident had prescribed lithium for me and had urged me to put up with the side effects. A social worker at the hospital had told me that I would never be able to work again. I had started doing volunteer work at Ronald Fieve’s Lithium Clinic in New York. Dr. Fieve told me that there was no reason I could not continue working as a conference interpreter and tour guide and encouraged me to become a patient advocate. I did, but I was still convinced that bipolar illness could strike me down again at any point in time and that it was not worth my while to actively build up my life and pursue love, work, and personal interests. It was at this point that I met Mogens Schou. He had given an encouraging lecture on lithium and did not disappear at the end of his lecture to be whizzed back to the airport in a limousine as most other speakers. He mingled with the patients, did not sit at the VIP table reserved for lecturers at the conference, but sat among us and participated in all patient activities and self-help groups; he stated that he had come to learn from patients just as much as he had come to educate and encourage them. He told women that there was no reason not to have children because of bipolar illness or because of being on lithium. I perceived him as almost being a saint! In personal talks, he encouraged me to everything I wanted to do. I told him that if I were ever to feel better again I would go out into the world and become an inspired patient advocate. I have remained an ardent admirer of Mogens Schou, who has pas-
sionately maintained his dedication and integrity in promoting what for most of us bipolar patients is the best and cheapest medication: lithium. The reassuring part of being on lithium is that I know that it has a protective effect against suicide, and my father has committed suicide and there are quite a lot of suicides on my mother’s side of the family as well.

My psychopharmacologist and I have learned to fine-tune my lithium intake so that I can live life to the fullest and regard lithium as an insurance policy, adjusting the levels to maximize the benefits and to minimize any potential side effects.

I have been a patient advocate promoting lithium for more than 20 years and I have even started a Lithium Clinic in Bolivia, where I was born and where people are so poor they cannot afford any other medication. I am convinced that Mogens Schou has returned life not only to me but to many others. I hope that with this revised book he will continue to save and restore more lives to worthwhile adventures in living!

Marylou Selo
Patient Advocate
Co-founder DBSA (Depressive and Bipolar Support Alliance, Chicago, Ill., USA – www.DBSAlliance.org), Equilibrium, Zug, Switzerland (www.Equilibrium.org)
Preface
to the 6th, Revised Edition

The first edition of this book was published in 1980 and was kindly received by readers and reviewers. Later editions have kept pace with newer developments.

Eleven years have passed since the publication of the 5th edition. Important new information can now be included. The book has been totally re-written, and a new chapter has been added about lithium’s protective action against suicide.

It is the author’s hope that the book will continue to be of use for patients and relatives as well as for physicians, nurses, and other care providers.

Mogens Schou