

# MOVIE REVIEW: SIDE EFFECTS

Emina Horvat Velić

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Science, Department of Biology

 0000-0002-8861-2719

“Side Effects” is 2013 film directed by Steven Soderbergh and categorized as a psychological thriller. It follows the narrative of a female patient accused and acquitted for murdering her husband during a sleep-walking episode seemingly caused by the administration of a new, experimental anti-depressant. First half of the movie is based on exactly that premise – due to negative side effects by the medications prescribed to her in order to manage her depression, Emily (played by extraordinary Rooney Mara) unknowingly kills her husband who was just released from prison after committing white collar financial fraud. Side effects, in medicine, are term used to prescribe effects of the drug different from the intended effect – it can be used to describe both good and bad, but it is usually connected to negative connotations of a drug. Obviously, side effects can happen with all kind of prescribed drugs.

As the movie explores its story, it becomes rather obvious that something ominous is at play – despite suffering from the side effects of imaginary antidepressant drug called “Ablixa”, our protagonist Emily does not suffer any of the difficult effects usually coupled with a prolonged taking, such as nausea, weight gain, dizziness, or anxiety. Naturally, as a viewer, we assume that maybe there is no place in a big-budget Hollywood production for that kind of representation, or that, perhaps, since “Ablixa” is presented as a new antidepressant, it lacks the usual side-effects. However, we cannot get rid of the feeling that something is just not quite right as the movie moves focus to the relationship between Emily and her court assigned psychiatrist. As Jonathan (Jude Law) starts to see the cracks in Emily’s story, his personal life falls apart after his wife receives compromising photographs that imply he overpassed his professional boundaries and had an affair with Emily while still being her physician. Through not so subtle web of lies told by Jonathan, that would probably get him disbarred, we find out



Figure 1. Official movie poster.

Source: Index of /wp-content/gallery/side-effects. <http://unwrappedphotos.com/wp-content/gallery/side-effects/>. Accessed March 16, 2017.

that Emily in fact faked her illness with the help of her previous psychiatrist and lover Victoria (Catherine Zeta-Jones), in order to get rid of the husband she blamed for her unhappiness and also for financial gain, since “Ablixa” stock prices have plummeted due to her successful plea of insanity under the duress of the drug. In the denouement, Victoria is successfully apprehended, while Emily cannot even be tried again due to double jeopardy laws in the United States, but Jonathan gets his revenge by maintaining her fake illness on the medical records and prescribing her new medication with numerous side effects and sending her to medical facility that is supposed to have her locked up for, presumably, life.

Despite being the work of fiction and getting good critics results, this film is important for precisely two things. First one is the obvious question about the consequences of the numerous drugs prescribed for the treatment of the psychiatric illnesses, not just depression – could this kind of scenario play out in the real world, and be truth? Could a medication really cause such a case and unwanted outcome? Of course, the nature of every disorder is specific to disorder itself, as well as to every individual person, which brings us to the second problematic issue – can a trained psychiatrist truly be deceived to this extent? Can he have his reputation ruined for honestly believing

a misdiagnosed patient? How long can he carry on before realizing he’s been lied to, and what actions he can take? What are repercussions for a patient? Can there even be some legal action or should the doctor just let the whole thing fade away? Although dealing with semi-real thesis, the question still remains how the movie influenced real world cases. Did it help with recognizing the ones feigning the illness, or just put extra strain on the patients dealing with the illness that is already under deep historical stigma? Regardless of being the rather entertaining thriller, we are left wondering whether the movie deepened the negative view of the various psychiatric illnesses in the general public.



**Figure 2.** A scene from the movie.

Source: *Index of /wp-content/gallery/side-effects.* <http://unwrappedphotos.com/wp-content/gallery/side-effects/>. Accessed March 16, 2017.