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**Popcult**

**Imagine being awake 22 hours a day**

**By Heidi Dawley**

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There are just not enough hours in the day. There is work to do, exercise to squeeze in, children to care for and, when time allows, houses to clean and endless emails to return before falling into bed, always hours late. And even then, there's the nagging knowledge that much work was not done.

So of course we will all be delighted to learn that shortly there will be drugs that will get us by on just a couple of hours of sleep a day. Or will we?

Here's the dope. Scientists are now advancing on a new group of lifestyle drugs that follow the success of Modafinil, an increasingly popular drug launched some seven years ago that allows users to subsist on just four hours of sleep a night. The New Scientist, the respected British journal, notes that the new drugs "promise to do for sleep what the contraceptive pill did for sex--unshackle it from nature."

Fine, you say. More hours, more work, more leisure, more emails returned, more kids' noses wiped, more kitchen floors waxed to a sheen, more charity events attended.

But this new world, economists and philosophers worry, would be more than just more of everything. It would promise to be one of great social change, and not all agree to the good.

It raises important questions about how life would evolve. What would be the effect if people could work and play more? Would scientists with more time invent more? Would extra free time at night lead to a population explosion? Would people deplete the earth's resources faster?

And ultimately would anyone, in fact, be any happier?

Economists seem to agree that people's nights would be transformed, with bars, restaurants and other entertainment venues busier and open longer. The leisure economy would boom.

But some economists worry that the ultimate effect would be to exacerbate various behaviors that are not always healthy. Dr. Babis Mainemelis, assistant professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, believes that people would spend much of that extra time working.

"I think in the West we work more than we need to simply because we have bought into the work-ethic idea that work is the ultimate arena for self-development and personal accomplishment," he says. In fact, he opines, some people no longer know what to do with free time they do have, aside from work.

More work time could further compound the ills of an already work-obsessed culture, such as workaholism and job burnout.

Some good could come out of that. Society could conceivably be forced to confront its obsession with work, and change, realigning its values away from the workplace toward goals with deeper spiritual values. But that could be a protracted process, with a lot of damaged lives along the way.

Another economist, John Van Reenen, professor and director for the Centre for Economic Performance, part of the London School of Economics, speculates that the two-hour sleep pill could worsen inequality in the world. The already-booming economies of developed nations, now fueled on time-creating drugs, would race further ahead. Poorer nations, unable to afford the new drugs, would lag, creating even greater global unrest.

But economic impact aside, people wonder what the ultimate impact of less sleep would be on people's psychological well being. Sleep helps us escape from life for a bit, explains Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture at Syracuse University.

Would people seek other ways to escape? Perhaps they'd turn to recreational drugs, suggests Thompson, more than they already do. Or maybe more people would turn to yoga or staring at the TV to escape.

Or perhaps sleep would become the ultimate recreation of the leisure class, taking the place of such activities as golf and tennis. Imagine our nation's elite slipping away for a few days at a sleep spa, where they would doze away whole weekends.

Ultimately, would more time awake make anyone happier? Or just busier? "I think 18 hours of being conscious in 21st-century America is just about enough for anybody," says Thompson.

Echoes Mainemelis: "I think it would be wonderful if a company discovered a drug that makes people sleep a bit more, slow down more, and enjoy life more. That would be a fantastic drug indeed."

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