



It's Time to Stop the Pharmaceutical Industry from putting Profit ahead of Health



Mohamed Elmasry*

Department of Computer Engineering, University of Waterloo, Canada

***Corresponding author:** Mohamed Elmasry, Professor, Department of Computer Engineering, University of Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada,
Email: Elmasry@uwaterloo.ca

Submission: 📅 March 09, 2018; **Published:** 📅 March 14, 2018

Opinion

For the past century the global pharmaceutical industry has increasingly placed money ahead of human well-being. It began by researching natural remedies discovered by our ancient ancestors, then synthesizing the active ingredients in their labs, patenting the process... and now, making billions. A recent report reveals that "Big Pharma fat cats have taken to extreme measures to ensure their drugs keep getting prescribed, namely bribing doctors in continuing prescriptions." Among them, American drug manufacturer John Kapoor (founder and former CEO of Insys Therapeutics) was arrested in October 2017 charged with conspiring to bribe doctors to needlessly prescribe the powerful drug Fentanyl against the best interests of their patients. Excessive prescription use and unprecedented street availability of opioids through organized crime have resulted in a skyrocketing overdose death rate in both the US and Canada. Opioids, notably Fentanyl, have created a new generation of addicts, many of whom abuse these drugs in combination with heroin, crack cocaine and other toxic substances.

The amoral behavior exhibited by Mr. Kapoor is chilling evidence of how aggressively Big Pharma executives are willing to push drug products purely for financial gain, despite fully knowing their devastating effects. Acting United States Attorney William D. Weinreb stated: "In the midst of a nationwide opioid epidemic that has reached crisis proportions, Mr. Kapoor and his company stand accused of bribing doctors to overprescribe a potent opioid and committing fraud on insurance companies solely for profit." Alarming, Kapoor and Insys Therapeutics are anything but an isolated case. In the United States alone 1,630 drug manufacturing companies have made "incentive" payments totalling more than \$3.5 billion to more than 681,000 doctors. At the other end of the well-being scale, another U.S.-based Big Pharma player, Martin Shkreli (incarcerated in 2017 for securities fraud), became the media's "most hated man in America" when it was revealed in 2015 that his company, Turing Pharmaceuticals, had increased the price of a life-saving HIV drug by more than 5000% times. Shkreli became notorious for mocking his critics and showing no remorse for actions which made a vital medication unaffordable for those who lives depended on it.

How did our society come to such a point where drug manufacturers can literally hold their customers hostage through sheer greed? Here is a brief history. The for-profit pharmaceutical industry emerged during the mid-19th century, led by Germany's Merck Company. Originating as a pharmacy founded in 1668, in 1827 Heinrich Emanuel Merck began developing an industry for manufacturing and selling alkaloids. In the US, Pfizer was founded in 1849 by German immigrants whose business expanded rapidly during the American Civil War as demand for painkillers soared. Edward Robinson Squibb, a naval doctor during the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848 set up a laboratory in 1858; like Pfizer, his company supplied Union civil war armies. The Bayer Company was founded in 1863 as a dye-manufacturer, but later moved into medicines. Around the turn of the 20th century, it commercialized Aspirin, one of the most profitable drugs in history.

In a 1950 interview, the year he appeared on the iconic cover of Time Magazine, George Merck said: "We try never to forget that medicine is for the people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow, and if we have remembered that, they have never failed to appear. The better we remember it, the larger they have been." Ironically and tragically, Merck's vision has been virtually obliterated in the 21st century by the some of the biggest players in the pharmaceutical industry and we all suffer in some way from their ethical and moral failures. So what can we do to stop the dangerous power of profit-driven Big Pharma and save our health?

Here are some starting suggestions:

A. Deans of medical schools should integrate alternative medical care into their academic programs, so the next generation of medical professionals can reduce their reliance on prescribing synthetic drugs and adopt a more preventive healing approach that emphasizes diet, exercise, touch therapies such as massage, counseling, etc.

B. Governments should support and fund research on ancient natural and indigenous medicines used effectively for generations in Egypt, India, China, Africa, and among North American native peoples, and bring more of these practices into mainstream healthcare.

C. Governments and media should publicize lobbying campaigns by the pharmaceutical industry to ban alternative medicines.

D. Government-sponsored health insurance programs should cover medically recommended alternatives to synthetic drug usage.

E. Malpractice compensation maximums should be lowered to encourage qualified medical professionals to develop, test, apply and share more alternative treatments.

F. Non-invasive therapies should be encouraged to reduce the massive over-use of anti-depressant drugs, which reap billions in excess profit for major manufacturers.

G. Money incentives, bogus “research” grants, free big-ticket rewards (such as expense-paid trips), and other unearned “bribes”

given to medical professionals by Big Pharma companies should be openly censured and reported in detail by governments and media.

H. Choosing medical school as a vocation for public good, rather than a fast-track to wealth alone, should be instilled into youth from middle school, or even earlier.

I. Long statutory limits on drug patents, which give originating companies excessive monopolies on supply, pricing, and profit-taking, should be lowered drastically, allowing more affordable generic drugs faster approval. Big Pharma lawyers should not be allowed to create barriers to the common good.

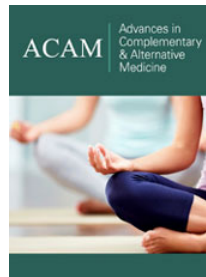
J. More and continuing research on the use and production of natural painkillers should be encouraged at both industry and government levels.



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