

Researched Persuasive Writing and Speaking

Big Pharma: Putting Clients Over Cures

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At age 11, a boy walks into an emergency room, bleeding and anxious as he awaits surgery for his arm. He leaves the hospital a few hours later with a shiny new cast and a prescription for painkillers, not realizing that this is the beginning of the end. This is the story of T.J. Walden, a young man who lost his life to opioid abuse at age 21, having first been prescribed a string of opiate painkillers nearly a decade earlier (McGreal, 2017). His story is just one of the thousands of patients who walk into medical offices seeking a cure, only to become just another client.

Today, the pharmaceutical industry is a booming business, estimated to reach a worth of 1.17 trillion dollars by 2021 (Business Research Company, 2018). And yet, the market is not always smooth sailing for the inventors and investors of cures, as it largely depends on the prevalence of ailments. For Big Pharma, it's become a simple issue of supply and demand: the more diseases they cure, the fewer people need their help. Therefore, through the prolongation of patents, generation of conditions, and mitigation of cure efficiency for profit, Big Pharma has shifted its focus from cures to clients.

One way this change is observed is through the growing lack of innovation for which the pharmaceutical industry is known. Recent research shows that 78% of patents approved by the FDA are for existing medications. From 2000-2011, only 4% of new global medications treated neglected diseases. In the U.S., taxpayers funded research for all new FDA approved drugs between 2010-2016, but nearly all of that money went towards sustaining existing profitable drug markets rather than innovating in areas of need (Mazzucato, 2018). Through such business maneuvers, the industry puts the creation of new cures at a standstill.

To put it simply, the pharmaceutical industry has become an oxymoron: both sickness and so-called “cure.” After all, companies like Purdue Pharma, the producer of OxyContin, a highly addictive narcotic, were charged to have falsely misled millions like Walden into opiate prescriptions as treatment for mild pain (Lopez, 2019). In 2015, Big Pharma spent a record-breaking \$5.4 billion on direct-to-consumer ads, which often aim to “sell symptoms,” convincing people to take unwarranted drugs (Llamas, 2020). By disguising diseases as cures, the pharmaceutical industry creates customers.

Despite these clear indications, some believe that Big Pharma has indeed worked to better health, citing drugs that alleviate symptoms. However, this is a flawed argument, as the growing trend of Big Pharma is to put cure profitability above effectiveness by *only* treating symptoms. For example, in the case of the life-threatening liver infection, Hepatitis C, a successful cure was introduced by Gilead Corporation in 2014 but quickly lost profit after a less effective competitor drug was put on the market. The reason? Investors were much more willing to put their money into a drug that would keep patients coming back, rather than cure them completely (Nocera, 2018). In this way, Big Pharma wants patients to remain patients, no matter the cost.

Back in the 1950s, when polio was the greatest disease ravaging the world, Jonas Salk invented a cure for free, rejecting patents due to a moral impediment (Nocera, 2018). The times have clearly changed, with today’s pharmaceutical industry stunting innovation, creating conditions among patients, and putting cost above competence. Only when Big Pharma takes a page from Salk’s book, can we expect to see a healthcare industry that fulfills its intended purpose: caring for people’s health.

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