

Zach Kuenzi

Professor Lucas

Writing 122

03-6-22

Pharmaceutical Companies Role in the Opioid Epidemic

The opioid epidemic has become one of the most pressing public health crises in recent times, with an estimated 50,000 deaths from opioid overdoses each year in the United States alone. Opioid addiction affects people of all ages, races, and socio-economic backgrounds, and its devastating effects have been felt across the country. While many factors have contributed to the rise of opioid addiction, one of the most significant is the role played by pharmaceutical companies in promoting and marketing opioids. Through analyzing the opioid epidemic, the only conclusion is that the pharmaceutical companies involved should have taken a proportionate share of responsibility for creating the problem, which is important because millions of Americans have been, and are being, devastated by it.

The opioid epidemic can be traced back to the 1990s when pharmaceutical companies began to aggressively market opioids as a safe, and effective treatment for chronic pain. They argued that opioids were non-addictive when used as directed and downplayed the risks of addiction and overdose. This led to a sharp increase in the number of opioid prescriptions, which in turn led to a rise in opioid addiction and overdose deaths. According to a paper discussing the opioid pandemic and epidemic said, "Data from The Center for Disease Control shows that from 1996 to 2021 over 500,000 Americans have died from Opioid-related overdoses with over 100,000 deaths alone during the current pandemic (White 2022).

Pharmaceutical companies played a key role in this increase in opioid prescriptions by engaging in aggressive marketing tactics. They funded research that downplayed the risks of addiction and overdose, and they employed sales representatives who promoted opioids to doctors with incentives and perks. They also lobbied politicians and regulatory agencies to relax restrictions on opioid prescribing and distribution. This whole crisis was able to get its initial lift off of the ground because the FDA and politicians allowed it to. In America, these politicians are the final say in a lot of these drugs and their words mean a lot. They have a huge influence on what drugs get approved, and what drugs are mainstreamed. This created a perfect storm of factors that led to the opioid epidemic we see today.

One argument against holding pharmaceutical companies responsible for the opioid epidemic is that addiction is a personal choice and that people who become addicted to opioids are solely responsible for their addiction. However, this argument ignores the role played by pharmaceutical companies in promoting and marketing opioids. By downplaying the risks of addiction and overdose, and by aggressively marketing opioids to doctors and patients, pharmaceutical companies created a situation in which many people were exposed to opioids without fully understanding the risks. A lot of these patients that first got addicted especially early on in the epidemic had these opioids prescribed by doctors. Since these drugs were so heavily marketed doctors were eager to give them to patients because they believed they were helping them. The statistics about how addiction to these drugs was hidden from the general public for quite some time and this caused physicians to unknowingly get patients addicted (Goodyear, 2022). This is particularly true for people who were prescribed opioids for chronic pain, who may not have been fully aware of the risks of addiction and overdose when they began taking the drugs. Since these drugs were so addictive once their doctor no longer prescribed these

opioids, especially the patients with chronic pain still needed drugs. That's when a lot of people turn to heroin and fentanyl because it's a lot cheaper than real pills.

Another argument against holding pharmaceutical companies responsible is that opioids are legally prescribed by doctors and that doctors are the ones who ultimately decide how opioids are prescribed and used. While it is true that doctors have a responsibility to prescribe opioids responsibly, they are often under pressure from pharmaceutical companies and insurance companies to prescribe opioids in higher quantities and for longer durations than is necessary. The doctors didn't have a lot of choices when it came to helping patients with pain management because these insurance companies supported the opioid drugs so heavily. A lot of the time for the major insurance plans their only option was to give their patients opioids. Pharmaceutical companies have employed sales representatives who visit doctors and promote opioids, often with gifts and perks. This creates a conflict of interest that can make it difficult for doctors to make objective decisions about opioid prescribing.

Furthermore, pharmaceutical companies have been known to misrepresent the risks and benefits of opioids to doctors and to fund research that downplays the risks of addiction and overdose. This creates a situation in which doctors are given incomplete or misleading information about the risks of opioids, making it difficult for them to make informed decisions about opioid prescribing. In many cases, doctors may have been misled by pharmaceutical companies into believing that opioids were safe and effective when they were not.

A third argument against holding pharmaceutical companies responsible is that they are not the only ones who profit from the opioid epidemic. Drug dealers, illegal drug manufacturers, and other stakeholders also profit from the sale of opioids. While it is true that many people and

organizations have profited from the opioid epidemic, pharmaceutical companies played a key role in creating the conditions that allowed the epidemic to occur. By aggressively marketing opioids and downplaying the risks of addiction and overdose, they created a situation in which many people were exposed to opioids, leading to widespread addiction and overdose.

Pharmaceutical companies also have a responsibility to ensure that their products are used safely and responsibly, and they failed to do so in the case of opioids. The mass manufacturing and addiction caused by these opioids have led to what we are now seeing which is fentanyl overdoses which are the main killer in this epidemic now. In an article written by Jennifer Lyden, that discusses what the epidemic has evolved into it talks about how almost all of the fatal overdoses are caused by fentanyl more than anything else. She said that it is considerably easy to make and way cheaper for both the manufacturer and the consumer. Something that makes it very dangerous is the fact that such a small amount can kill you instantly. Also, fentanyl is often unknowingly in products in other words it is used to lace drugs like heroin.

In addition, pharmaceutical companies must conduct clinical trials and research to ensure that their products are safe and effective. However, in the case of opioids, many of the clinical trials were funded by the pharmaceutical companies themselves, and the results of these trials were often incomplete or misleading. They often came to very questionable findings or opted to only report certain findings rather than the truth. This created a situation in which doctors were given incomplete or misleading information about the risks of opioids, making it difficult for them to make informed decisions about opioid prescribing.

Another argument in favor of holding pharmaceutical companies responsible is that they have profited greatly from the opioid epidemic. The pharmaceutical industry is a

multibillion-dollar industry, and opioids have been a major source of revenue for many pharmaceutical companies. These companies that produced these drugs profited billions of dollars and it was all built on a lie. They had unfairly made this insane wealth built on the backs of lobbyists and horrible people. They knew that they were doing something that was so incredibly wrong yet they continued to do it without second thoughts. In 2019, Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, reached a settlement with the Department of Justice for \$8 billion for their role in the opioid epidemic. This settlement shows that pharmaceutical companies can and should be held responsible for their role in the opioid epidemic. This 8 billion dollar lawsuit is nothing compared to what these companies have made in the total span of drug production. The lawsuit doesn't even dip into what these companies have made and their owner still gets to go to sleep every night in a mansion with billions in his pocket.

Moreover, the profits that pharmaceutical companies have made from the opioid epidemic have come at a great cost to society. The economic costs of the opioid epidemic are estimated to be in the billions of dollars, and the social costs are immeasurable. The opioid epidemic has destroyed families, devastated communities, and left a trail of death and destruction in its wake. Pharmaceutical companies must be held accountable for the damage they have caused.

Finally, holding pharmaceutical companies responsible for the opioid epidemic is not just a matter of assigning blame. It is also a matter of creating accountability and ensuring that such a crisis does not happen again. By holding pharmaceutical companies responsible, we send a message that they cannot prioritize profits over public health and that they have a responsibility to ensure that their products are used safely and responsibly. This will help to create a culture of

responsibility within the pharmaceutical industry and prevent similar crises from occurring in the future. There is one thing that can be done to slow this epidemic down and that is making sure the doctors stop prescribing these opioids at the rate they are. In an article written by Alene Kennedy about possible ways we can stop this epidemic, she concluded that the most effective way to slow this down is to make sure these drugs are prescribed at a lower rate than before. These drugs were flying out of pharmacies and as we know now that helped to start the epidemic. So if these doctors stopped prescribing them the amount of new addiction cases will go down as a result (Alene 2016). However, this solution will only work to prevent new cases and won't help with the current cases we have going on.

The government has been trying for years now to combat the opioid epidemic but they have been unsuccessful in stopping it completely. They have implemented a variety of policies and even declared a state of emergency to try to allocate more resources to solving it. One of the more recent projects to come about was the introduction of the HEAL initiative which looks into science-based ways to combat the epidemic. This initiative has invested 2 billion dollars into 30 different projects thus far but even with this sizable investment they haven't found something that works yet. The government has also tried to lower the supply and demand cycle for these opioids to reduce the total amount of opioids prescribed. In a study done by Steven Sylvester, he looked into actual addicts and people close to addicts' thoughts on the current policies and policies they might help. He found that a lot of these addicts had smart ideas. Some of the ideas included making rehab more accessible and cutting off the production of them as a whole (Sylvester 2022). The government also has tried to just bring more awareness to these drugs and make sure that patients understand the negatives rather than just the fact they help with the pain.

The government is also looking into alternative pain relief such as acupuncture and chiropractic care.

In conclusion, the opioid epidemic is a complex problem with many factors contributing to its rise. However, pharmaceutical companies played a key role in creating the conditions that allowed the epidemic to occur. By aggressively marketing opioids and downplaying the risks of addiction and overdose, they created a situation in which many people were exposed to opioids, leading to widespread addiction and overdose. Pharmaceutical companies have a responsibility to ensure that their products are used safely and responsibly, and they failed to do so in the case of opioids. Therefore, they should be held responsible for the opioid epidemic, both to assign blame and to create accountability within the pharmaceutical industry. It is only by holding pharmaceutical companies responsible that we can ensure that such a crisis does not happen again.

References

Kennedy, Alene, et al. "Primary Care Physicians' Perspectives on the Prescription Opioid Epidemic." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, Elsevier, 21 May 2016, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0376871616301168>.

Alene Kennedy who works in the Health Policy and Management Department at John Hopkins University wrote this article with the goal of showing the doctor's view on this epidemic. Kennedy found that physician support could be used as a form of leverage to help slow down the epidemic. The only people who can truly stop the epidemic are the ones who prescribe the pills which are the doctors. This source was useful for me because it gave me a lot of valuable information to use in my essay and help further my argument. This source also showed little to no bias which made its credibility increase dramatically.

Lyden, Jennifer, and Ingrid A Binswanger. "The United States Opioid Epidemic." *Seminars in Perinatology*, W.B. Saunders, 14 Jan. 2019, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0146000519300011>.

Jennifer Lyden wrote this article to show what is killing people the most now. She found that the use of prescription pills was leading to addiction but not necessarily killing people. It was leading to addiction which led to the use of fentanyl which was cheaper and easy to get but super potent and super easy to overdose on. This source proved to be very useful to my argument because it helped me explain what getting addicted to these painkillers can lead to. This source also proved to be scholarly and not biased so I was able to take what the article said at face value.

White, Colin. "The Rise of Oxycontin: How Purdue Pharma and the Sackler Family Is Responsible for the Epidemic behind the Pandemic." *Dominican Scholar*, May 2022, <https://scholar.dominican.edu/history-senior-theses/10/>.

Colin White is an accredited author with a PhD in this subject so he was able to formulate a proper and unbiased paper about the epidemic. He starts his paper off by talking about how big pharma as a whole should take responsibility for the issue and how they got off the hook for so much. He also talked about how a lawsuit was successful in getting the Sackler Family to pay billions but that only ended up being a small percentage of what they made off these drugs. The family knew that these drugs were addictive and still marketed them and said that they were not addictive. They also pushed for doctors to market these drugs mainstream, and make them go to pain killers. This source really helped me find out the truth behind the opioid epidemic that no one really gets to see.

"The Impact of Race, Gender, and Heroin Use on Opioid Addiction Stigma." *The Impact of Race, Gender, and Heroin Use on Opioid Addiction Stigma - ScienceDirect*, 8 Sep. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2022.108872>.

This study done by a group of researchers outlines the different types of stigmas that are out there for the use of opioids. There is a lot of different explanations and reasonings for this and how opioid use is something that is frowned upon by so many people when a lot of times it's not their fault. Since opioids are so addictive many people that get them prescribed post-surgery become addicted. They are extremely hard to come off of and that's the reason a lot of these patients can't stop using. It talks about how certain races are more prone to opioid use for a lot of different reasons, and that gender also plays some sort

of a role. It goes into the studies that were conducted to find their results as well. I thought this study was done very well and it seems like something I can really use in my essay.

Sylvester, Steven M., et al. "Just Say No? Public Attitudes About Supportive and Punitive Policies to Combat the Opioid Epidemic | Journal of Public Policy | Cambridge Core." *Cambridge Core*, 9 Feb. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X21000155>.

This study was done by a bunch of different qualified researchers that have PHDs in their respective fields. This article goes into the possible solutions to combat the epidemic. It talked about how certain policies put into effect actually did help out and do some good. They talked about how a lot of people are actually opposed to this solution rather than trying to make them work. The government has tried many different things to fix this epidemic but every day there are still people dying. This source really helped me to figure out what the government has tried to do to combat this problem.