

America's Drug Problem

By Taylor Donovan, DC

The drug industry is the most popular industry in the world. In her book, *The Truth About Drug Companies*, Marcia Angell, MD, the first woman to serve as editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, reports that in 2001, the top drug companies listed in Fortune 500 had an average profit after taxes of 18.5 % whereas the other Fortune 500 companies averaged only 3.3 %. Commercial banking, with profits of 13.5 %, was the only industry close to Big Pharma. Even more amazing than that, in 2002, the \$35.9 billion in profits earned by the top ten drug companies in the Fortune 500 were greater than the profits of the other 490 Fortune 500 companies combined.

Despite the highest per capita expenditure for medical care in the world, America ranks close to the bottom for industrialized nations in actual quality of health care. The numbers are staggering- up from \$114 per person in 1960 to \$2,738 in 1980 to \$5,267 in 2002. Health care spending per person in the U.S. was \$7,290 in 2007 -- this includes public (government) spending and private spending -- whereas the 30-nation average was \$2,984. That's almost 2 1/2 times higher than other industrialized nations. The fatal flaw in America is that health care has become a for profit business.

There are two branches in the pharmaceutical industry, the marketing and science branch. The science branch is responsible for getting studies to the FDA that show that a drug is more effective than the placebo in attaining a specific biochemical outcome. The pharmaceutical company has the ability to submit the studies of its own choosing and can bury the studies that show results that aren't promising. Once the FDA approves a drug as being effective for changing a biomarker associated with a disease the marketing branch takes over. Their tireless and effective marketing strategies are of legend and include paid vacations, paybacks to physicians, myriad gifts and promotions, and free samples. The marketing branch will go to no end to promote a drug solution to any challenge. Direct sales encourage citizens to talk to their physicians about all sorts of drugs. For a disgusting crash course on some of their tactics look to the documentary *Killer at Large* which focuses in on food manufacturers direct marketing to children.

Consider the example of statins, a family of medications that are used to regulate the level of cholesterol in the blood. When first introduced, statins, which include brand medications such as Lipitor, Crestor, and Zocor, were prescribed primarily to people with heart disease. Over time advertising to the public and heavy marketing to medical professionals have led us to believe that statins are appropriate for all people. As a result statins have become a \$20 billion a year worldwide market. You'd think with this kind of price tag that there would be remarkable evidence showing statins effect on cardiovascular health.

An editorial in the premier medical journal *The Lancet* presented results of eight heart disease prevention trials that revealed statin therapy was not effective in reducing overall

risk of death. The study found that risk of cardiovascular events was only minimally reduced by statin therapy. The data revealed that 67 individuals would need to be treated with statins for five years for just one medical event to be prevented. One of the most startling findings of this review was that there was no apparent statin benefit seen in women of any age.

In addition to their ineffectiveness, statins are quite dangerous. For example, the warning that comes with a prescription for the statin drug Zocor is 19 pages long and all in fine print.

Why is the fact that statin drugs are shown to be largely ineffective and potentially dangerous for the majority of people who take them ignored by medical authorities? Could it be politics and money? In 2004, the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP), an expert panel assembled by the National Institute of Health, recommended that previously acceptable levels of cholesterol be lowered. After its recommendations were made and accepted, it was revealed that eight out of nine members of the NCEP's panel had financial links to companies that manufacture statin drugs. Consider the reality that each time the cholesterol guideline is dropped, the number of new statin prescriptions provides additional billions of dollars in profit for the insatiable pharmaceutical companies. The NCEP report's publisher described the omission of these clear conflicts of interest as "an oversight."

Continuing in the same vein, the American Academy of Pediatricians recently established new cholesterol guidelines for children. Children eight years of age and older who have high concentrations of LDL cholesterol in their blood are candidates for a lifelong regimen of statins. With no real science to support the claim that statins prevent future expression of heart disease, addicting children to a questionable drug is morally reprehensible. It's interesting to ponder the relationship between the big five food corporations and the medications that treat childhood obesity and associated lifestyle diseases.

Similarly, when the pharmaceutical industry needed to increase the profit margin by selling more blood pressure medication, it simply got the medical industry to change the definition of high blood pressure. In 2003 a new condition called pre-hypertension was introduced. The world now has a new condition that can be treated with the same old drugs, and the pharmaceutical industry has a brand-new market with many more new customers.

We're seeing certain trends becoming more and more acceptable in the practice of allopathic medicine. It's a defeating cyclical process whereby American culture gets sicker by the foods and medicines they take and the most popular management of these diseases and disorders are more medications and surgery.