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Unethixs: The Truth About Pharmaceutical Ethics

The beginning of the 21st century has marked a technological revolution unknown to man. With advances in technology on a nearly daily basis, businesses are now able to better provide products that enhance the human life. One multi-billion dollar industry that fits well within this category is the pharmaceutical industry. Drug companies stock pharmacy shelves with several new and revolutionary drugs each year, continually lengthening the human life, but should such life-saving medications have such astronomical prices? Should thousands of Americans have to suffer because of one industry's unethical business tactics? Despite their production of ground-breaking medications, pharmaceutical companies should lower prices and use ethical business practices to obtain desired profits.

Through the years, the pharmaceutical industry has experienced tremendous growth. "The modern pharmaceutical industry got its start in the nineteenth century" when drugs such as morphine, nicotine, and cocaine were created and mass produced (Petryna, Lakoff, Kleinman eds. 2). World War II marked the introduction and mass production of drugs such as penicillin and chloramphenicol, which in turn, transformed many small chemical businesses into large, global pharmaceutical firms (Petryna, Lakoff, Kleinman eds. 2). Such improvements have made pharmaceutical companies some of the most wealthy and influential corporations in the world.

However, in the year 1937, the pharmaceutical industry made one deathly mistake that would only begin a legacy of shortcomings and unethical practices. One Tennessee drug

company, whose name shall remain unknown, sold an untested pediatric product to the public, killing approximately 100 helpless children (Hatch). In response, the public became outraged and demanded that something be done. As a result, the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 was passed requiring that “new drugs be shown safe before marketing” (Hatch). This single action has led to an era of deserved pharmaceutical reform that should only tighten with time.

In spite of such errors, pharmaceutical companies have been slightly proactive in self-reform, but one area that remains untouched is drug prices. Between the years 1990 and 2000, the price of prescription drugs has more than doubled (Hatch). This is a staggering figure considering that the most beneficial drugs are those obtained by prescription. With our nation’s current economic situation, many Americans cannot afford the high prices of prescription drugs, rendering their bodies helpless against fighting sicknesses. It is also reported that the United States has some of the highest prescription drug costs in the world today. In fact, drug prices in the United States are approximately 55 percent higher than those in the United Kingdom (Hatch).

To refute such accusations, pharmaceutical companies defend themselves by flaunting statistical data. For instance, in the year 2002, pharmaceutical companies collectively spent in excess of \$32 billion on research and development (Hatch). Indeed, this figure is impressive considering the many life-saving drugs that have been produced by spending such excessive amounts of money. This figure becomes less impressive when one discovers that only 23 percent of these drugs are “significant improvements” on existing products (qtd in Hatch). FDA documents show that many of these revolutionary medicines are only “modest, incremental improvements” (qtd in Hatch).

One topic that is currently being argued in regards to drug company reform is the payment of doctors by large pharmaceutical companies for medical research. Several companies

in the United States pay doctors to conduct medical research and trials on their drugs. This is done as a safeguard to protect patients that may be potentially treated by this medication.

Unfortunately, this payment often times sways doctors' opinions of the drugs being tested.

Consequently, doctors will falsely report study findings in favor of large drug companies or even prescribe these drugs in their everyday practices. "Research has found that industry money can bias doctors' interpretation of study findings and may alter their prescribing habits" (Casey).

These unethical actions put millions of Americans at risk of death or serious injury. The state of Minnesota found that from the years 1997 to 2005, drug makers paid in upwards of \$57 million to over 5,500 doctors and nurses in the state (Casey). No one truly knows how much of this money was spent to sway the many doctors and nurses that received funds. Drug companies have very little to no defense in response to this argument. To help disguise their original intent, drug companies welcome government reform pertaining to this issue with open arms.

Generic drugs, a cheap alternative to brand-name prescription drugs, are a must have for people going through times of financial struggle. Instead of paying \$70 for a brand-name prescription drug, people can purchase its generic for a significantly lower price while reaping the benefits of the brand-name drug. This beneficial alternative has been sought by many Americans since the production of generics but has been fought by major pharmaceutical firms. One of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, Bristol-Myers Squibb, allegedly paid a generic company around \$70 million to keep a generic form of their medication BuSpar off of pharmacy shelves (Hatch). This bribery protected \$2 billion dollars in annual sales for Bristol-Myers Squibb (Hatch). If this generic form of BuSpar would have been made available, many cancer patients could have fought cancer at a much lower cost. Such misconduct is not only unethical but illegal.

To defend such misconduct, drug companies state that such tactics are only “savvy and hard-nosed business practices” (Hatch). Spending on research and development is also a recurring defense mechanism used in this argument. The question arises -- how often do “savvy and hard-nosed business practices” keep Americans from receiving the healthcare they deserve?

Arguably one of the most debated topics in pharmaceutical reform is the area of drug advertising. Should drug companies be allowed to advertise their products on television? Take the following data into consideration. In the year 2000, pharmaceutical companies spent \$2 billion on advertisement alone (Sollisch 1). This is money that could have aided in reducing drug costs. In addition, such advertisements display people with sickening conditions living carefree lives due to taking a wonder drug. Drug advertising also fosters the thought that drugs offer solutions to all of life’s problems. Communicating such content is undoubtedly unethical. If advertising is to continue, regulations should be established to better the material shown.

It is quite obvious that pharmaceutical companies in the United States require a great deal of reform before their practices will be viewed as ethical. Perhaps in the near future, one pharmaceutical giant will spend billions of dollars creating a medication designed to aid drug companies in making ethical decisions. Called Unethixs, this revolutionary drug will be advertised every 30 seconds, making it impossible to watch your favorite television sitcom any night of the week. When its generic is developed, the maker of Unethixs will illegally pay millions of dollars to keep the generic off of the market, thus, keeping hundreds of pharmaceutical companies from an ethical future. Despite its dangerous side effect, impaired judgment, doctors will deem Unethixs safe to the public, only for a few dollars of course. As illustrated above, our nation’s pharmaceutical industry is far from perfect. By overpricing medications, illegal bribery, and crude advertisement, American pharmaceutical firms have

participated in a slew of unethical activities, all while keeping millions of Americans from a potentially healthy future.

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