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Pharma Corruption

What do allegations brought against pharmaceutical companies in China in 2013 and the influence of the pharmaceutical industry on global pharmaceutical policy have in common? One word comes to mind: corruption.

Corruption of doctors in China. China has been pursuing a determined anti-corruption policy for some years (1). As a result, several pharmaceutical companies, including GSK, Eli Lilly, Novartis and Sanofi, have been accused of corruption, a legal term that refers in this case to payments disguised as research fees made to doctors as an incentive to prescribe the company's drugs (1,2).

Global institutional corruption. Harvard University's Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics (US) has published a collection of articles on the theme of "Institutional corruption and pharmaceutical policy", in which 16 authors describe various aspects of the institutional corruption of pharmaceutical policy and medical practice. In this context, corruption refers to policies and practices diverted from their purpose and from values that serve the public interest by the special interests of the pharmaceutical industry.

"As a result, practitioners may think they are using reliable information to engage in sound medical practice, while they are actually relying on misleading information; they may then prescribe drugs that are unnecessary or harmful to patients, or more costly than equivalent medications" (3).

Several books published in 2013 illustrate this same phenomenon, citing numerous examples (4-6).

Unhealthily close ties between regulators and pharmaceutical companies. Another academic analysis showed that persons who work for the pharmaceutical industry and those who work for the US drug regulatory agency (FDA) have, over the years, developed a common culture. Regulators have become "pro-industry", having adopted the same views as pharmaceutical companies (a phenomenon referred to as "regulatory capture"), in particular by accepting that "*there is a direct trade-off between drug safety and drug innovation*" (7). In summary, "*the political organizations of the global pharmaceutical industry have come to shape the conversation about how drugs ought to be regulated*" (7).

An antidote. Pharmaceutical companies have managed to impose their commercial interests and their values, at the expense of pharmaceutical policy and medical practice. Thinking and acting first and foremost in the interest of patients is now, more than ever, the necessary antidote to corruption in the field of health care.

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Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.

- 1- "GSK, bribery and the China conundrum" *Scrip Intelligence* 26 July 2013: 20.
- 2- "Accusations de corruption contre Novartis en Chine" ATS news agency, 17 September 2013: 1 page.
- 3- Rodwin MA et al. "Institutional corruption and pharmaceutical policy" *J Law Med Ethics* 2013; 41 (3): 544-746.
- 4- Goldacre B "Bad Pharma - How Drug Companies Mislead Doctors and Harm Patients" Faber & Faber, New York 2013: 448 pages.
- 5- Borch-Jacobsen M et al. "Big pharma - Une industrie toute-puissante qui joue avec notre santé" Les Arènes, Paris 2013: 528 pages.
- 6- Gøtzsche PC "Deadly Medicines and Organised Crime: How big pharma has corrupted healthcare" Radcliffe, 2013: 320 pages.
- 7- Carpenter D "Corrosive capture? The dueling forces of autonomy and industry influence in FDA pharmaceutical regulation" 2013: 30 pages.