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Pharmaceutical companies: books on the current crisis

Drug companies are relative newcomers to the history of medicine, as they date back only a few decades. Their golden era lasted from the 1950s to the 1970s, with the release of many new products, many of which are still the drugs of choice today because of their favourable risk-benefit balance. This period was superseded in the 1980s and 1990s by another unprecedented "success story", but this time of a purely commercial and financial nature. It was accompanied by fewer and fewer offering tangible therapeutic advance, together with a growing number of wildly expensive products, a virtual takeover of medical information, training and drug evaluation, and increasing 'medicalisation' of daily life.

This crisis was even the subject of a thriller by John Le Carré, and of several critical analyses by a former bigPharma executive (1-3). Many other books have been published worldwide, investigating or denouncing the crisis and proposing alternative solutions.

Antidepressants, research costs: disinformation rules. In their book on antidepressants, Charles Medawar and Anita Hardon start with an in-depth analysis of a specific case, then go on to highlight the failings of medicines regulatory systems (4). They explain how the history of SSRI antidepressants and other psychotropics has repeated itself over the years, and how the risks associated with these drugs have tended to be swept under the carpet. The sources of these problems include inadequate clinical evaluation, incompetent and secretive regulatory agencies, commercial pressure by drug companies, and a general failure to listen to patients.

It is highly informative to read the chronology of these events, orchestrated by companies and regulatory agencies, who for years ignored patients' reasonable complaints.

The authors explain how dependence on SSRIs, and the risk of suicide, were first overlooked and then simply denied over a period of decades. They show how drug dependence was masked by a dependence of a completely different nature, namely the ties that bind the different players in the field of medicines. The active complicity of the various institutions (companies, medicines agencies and professional bodies), and the financial stakes (which together led to the suppression of information on

the adverse effects of SSRIs), are described in detail.

David Healy's book, which is meticulously documented and referenced, also provides details on how drug companies manoeuvred to create a need for antidepressants, then ignored or flatly denied their adverse effects, despite reports of suicide and violent behaviour among patients treated with SSRIs (5).

Merrill Gozner's book, which focuses on drug research, describes how pharmaceutical companies often simply pick the ripest fruits of public sector research in order to develop their new drugs (6). This is illustrated by several examples, notably in the fields of biotechnology, orphan diseases and AIDS.

Conflicts of interests, me-toos: a skewed system. Jerome P Kassirer, former editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, focuses on financial conflicts of interests, that have reached epidemic proportions in recent years and have influenced individuals, medical organisation, continuing education, research and experts, to the detriment of patients' interests and medical ethics (7).

Other books offer a more global view of the current crisis, dealing with issues such as excessive drug prices, misleading claims of research costs, manipulated clinical studies, misleading publicity, excessive medicalisation of life's little problems, omnipresent conflicts of interests, abusive patents, the abandonment of poor countries, and the increasing R&D focus on me-toos, with the sole aim of gaining market share (a).

Some authors cite examples from specific countries: Katharine Greider (8) and Jerry Avorn (9) in the USA, Jean-Claude St-Onge in Canada (10), Dirk Van Duppen in Belgium (11), and Bernard Debré and Philippe Even in France (12).

Some of the books cited here were written by renowned academics (Kassirer, Debré, Even, etc.). The book by Marcia Angell, former editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, is the best-known and most widely cited of this series (13).

Solutions. Most of the authors consider that drug companies are well aware they are spiralling out of control, and are waiting for someone to apply the brakes. Each author proposes a range of solutions, some simple, some more radical. Marcia Angell thinks that the most urgent reform is for

medicines agencies to demand that companies compare their new medicines with existing products, and not simply with placebo. In her view, this is the only way to save the pharmaceutical industry, which no longer plays its part: to research and develop medicines for patients who have no effective alternative.

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a- Another book has recently been published: "Selling Sickness: How the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies are turning us all into patients" by Ray Moynihan and Alan Cassels, Greystone Books, Canada 2005.

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1- Le Carré J "The constant gardener" Scribner December 12, 2000 : 480 pages.

2- Pignarre P "Le grand secret de l'industrie pharmaceutique" La Découverte, Paris 2003: 180 pages.

3- Pignarre P "Comment sauver (vraiment) la sécu" La Découverte, Paris 2004: 122 pages.

4- Medawar C and Hardon A "Medicines out of control?" 2004: 258 pages.

5- Healy D "Let them eat Prozac" James Lorimer and Co, Toronto 2003: 462 pages.

6- Gozner M "The 800 \$ million pill - The truth behind the cost of new drugs" University of California Press, Berkeley 2004:297 pages.

7- Kassirer JP "On the take - how medicine's complicity with big business can endanger your health" Oxford University Press, New York 2005: 251 pages.

8- Greider K "The big fix - How the pharmaceutical industry rips off American consumers" PublicAffairs, New York 2003:190 pages.

9- Avorn J "Powerful medicines: the benefits, risks and costs of prescription drugs" Knopf, New York 2004: 448 pages.

10- St-Onge JC "L'envers de la pilule - Les dessous de l'industrie pharmaceutique" Écosociété, Québec 2004: 228 pages.

11- Van Duppen D "La guerre des médicaments - Pourquoi sont-ils si chers?" Aden, Bruxelles 2005: 287 pages.

12- Even P and Debré B "Savoirs et pouvoirs - Pour une nouvelle politique de la recherche et du médicament" Le Cherche Midi, Paris 2004: 343 pages.

13- Angell M "The truth about the drug companies - how they deceive us about drug companies and what to do about it" Random House, New York 2004: 305 pages.