

The medical industry and money

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"Sickness is a malfunction of the soul. If we wish to profit from it, we have to see it as an ally that we have called upon to help us realign our sights, and re-find our direction."

"The greatest sickness of the soul continues to be submission. To others. To their ideas, their pressures, their fear, their expectations, their laws, their statistics, their treatments."

Guylaine Lanctot (2002)

Introduction

For a long time we have known that the pharmaceutical industry is about money and that at least a part of this industry does whatever possible to maximize profits, even at the cost of human lives – the patients' of course. Enough have been said about the Vioxx scandal, where a leading pharmaceutical company kept their product, the pain killer Vioxx, on the market, where it was used by over 80 million patients, in spite of a suspicion of dangerous adverse cardiac effects. The company that developed Vioxx has (according to the newspapers) been forced to pay billions of dollars in compensation for that after literally thousands of law suits.

This is not where we want to go with this story. We do not believe this company, which we will not mention here to protect its name a little, to be worse than most other pharmaceutical companies. Why should they be? They just do what they can to make money and please the stock holders. This is what big companies do. This is the most basic rule of the capitalistic western world.

But when we know this we should be aware of the danger of being manipulated by the industry. And we most certainly are manipulated by the pharmaceutical industry. For a long time we have known about bias in industrial studies (1), where they make billions of dollars, if only they can document

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that their product is better than the old similar one. Sometimes that is not the case, as we saw it in the case of antipsychotic drugs, where a large Cochrane metaanalysis documented that none of the newer drugs were better or less harmful than the original and first one, chlorpromazine (2). But a “new and better” drug sells and makes money to the company. We are tricked many times in the industrial studies, in thousand cunning ways. Therefore we now know that industrial papers on drugs in general should be looked upon with skepticism. This situation is not good, because a lot of drugs in medicine are based on these papers.

Luckily we have independent researchers, who survey national health and other kinds of medical research. The Cochrane collaboration is a great example of this, even though the industry unfortunately also plays an important role in making these metaanalysis as many of these studies are made with help from industrial employees. The people from the Cochrane collaboration are generally known to be critical to the industry, and they have often threatened commercial interests. When this has happened, the researchers have even sometimes been threatened on their life, as it happened with Tom Jefferson of the UK Cochrane collaboration after he documented that an influenza vaccine used in many countries had not been properly tested (3).

Attack on alternative medicine

But he is not the only one that has been attacked (4). The people who often are identified as attackers are often biomedical doctors and other people in close connection to the pharmaceutical industry, often holding powerful academic positions at the universities. The attacks always try to “discredit” and “neutralize” the opponents. These attacks have been well-planned and carried out with military precision and have often succeeded to take a leading researcher in alternative and holistic medicine out of the game of research, at least for a while.

Top researchers in holistic medicine and CAM also seem to be particularly out of luck and it has been suggested by researchers like Ghislaine Lanctot that some of the bad things that sometimes happens to people, who is not serving the interest of the

pharmaceutical industry are not purely accidental (5). In case you do not know Ghislaine Lanctot, she is a former physician from Quebec, Canada, who after the publication of “The medical mafia” (5), endured the wrath of the medical authorities, who demanded her resignation from the College of Physicians. Her refusal led to a highly publicized trial, which only served to bring the public's attention to a number of well-guarded secrets of the biomedical establishment. Her most provocative statement was that WHO was influenced by the pharmaceutical industry to promote influenza vaccines. Other books have told the same story, so the theme is not new, but only recently people with “common sense” have started to believe such stories.

We believe that most medical researchers are good people and not evil, but just biochemically oriented scientists that has some understandable difficulties in turning consciousness and similar abstract issues into rock-solid research objects. But of course they have to serve the hand that feed them. And we believe most pharmaceutical company directors to respect the law, but of course they have to appease the stock holders. And we find it a little hard to believe that there should be something like an international collaboration of drug companies against CAM, as suggested on the web (just google “Plan of 96”) (6). If there is such an organisation it certainly runs smoothly and invisibly. But then again, there might be one, as the industry can afford to buy the best of human brains.

Is there a medical mafia?

Some things are fairly mafia-like in the Nordic countries now, which are well illustrated by a few examples. The Danish movie director Peter Engberg wanted to make a Danish documentary about how three Swedish moviemakers that had been persecuted after making a critical film about the pharmaceutical industry in Sweden. But the director of Nordic Film did not want to make this documentary as he, according to Engberg, feared for his life if he did this documentary (7). Tom Jefferson told us that a newspaper journalist, who took interest in telling this story actually got fired, just before his story should

have been published in the paper and the story never came out (8).

The repression of information about what is happening at any cost seems to be a central part of the war against the alternative medicine. The internet is another example, where Wikipedia seemingly has been “hijacked” by the industry, so that researchers in holistic medicine are not allowed to write articles here (6). The google profile of holistic researchers are often also manipulated so articles of bad publicity artificially is held on top of search profiles (6). As this is not so easy to do, some rather powerful player must be at large.

The weapons of these attacks are always smart and cunning ways to “neutralise” and “discredit” the researchers. Most often evil rumours have been started, often by use of the media, which again have lead to public investigations of the researcher’s clinical practice, by national health authorities (4,9). These processes, which are merely built on fabricated horror stories that practically always are found to be untrue, are anxiously shared with the media, to bury the researcher in a major public scandal. In this situation it gets hard for the researcher to get funding, and as research is expensive, his activities close down, and often he is fired to protect the institution of his affiliation from being scandalised also.

The German cancer researcher Ulrich Abel got into big problems (10) after he published his metaanalysis documenting that chemotherapy did not help the patients (11). The German physician Ryke Geerd Hamer was even send to jail for helping cancer patients with non-drug medicine (12), a type of medicine that is known to have absolutely no side effects and adverse events.

Until now we have not been certain, which persons and organisations were behind the attacks we have witnessed on a number of leading CAM scientists in the International Society for Holistic Health.

Just because attacks have happened to several CAM researchers in the last five year period, it is difficult to say if this happens systematically, or if this just happened because all CAM researchers accumulate large amounts of enemies in their local environment, and the more enemies the more successful they are and famous they become.

An alternative hit list

According to the conservative newspaper the Australian, a pharmaceutical industry actually made a hit-list against researchers that threatened its interest in the Vioxx scandal (13). It is not known if the company actively silenced critiques or if they just considered to do so to keep Vioxx on the market for a longer time. But we know from this that the pharmaceutical companies actually do make systematic hit-lists containing the researchers that threaten their interests. We find it most likely that these hit-lists are made for a purpose. So if you want to know what hit you, just ask yourself who’s interests you have been threatening.

As researchers in non-drug medicine we share a humanistic philosophy and do therefore not like hit-lists much. We do like it even less when we as researchers are the target for it. But we like it even less again, when it is the huge, tremendously powerful pharmaceutical industry that puts us on hit-lists, because we threaten their interests. Infinitely resourceful opponents with a questionable ethics are not much fun.

If this is how the industry operates in general, then most independent medical researchers are likely to be on some industrial hit-list. The authors of this editorial have each made hundreds of scientific publications that in some way have threatened the commercial interests of the pharmaceutical industry. We (the first author) have also been attacked by people close to the industry going to the media in 2002 and again in 2005 with fabricated stories of harm, physical and sexual abuse, quackery etc. Stories that even sometimes have lead to investigation by the police, who did not find anything to criticise. But stories still have lead to the predicted public investigation, with an embarrassing, temporary suspension of medical licence and loss of funding.

What can we do?

But what are we to do about it? Well, the first thing is that we need some policing of the activities of the medical companies. We need to make it illegal to put researchers on hit-lists and promote products by destroying or hindering the people that could provide

the world with truthful, objective information on the products. We need to criminalize these activities. For believe it or not: Till this day these evil actions have been legal for all practical matters in most countries.

We therefore urgently need laws that forbid the pharmaceutical industry to make hit-lists, to neutralise and discredit researchers, to keep knowledge about adverse effects hidden etc. We need a strong body of laws that give the police access to all information of the company. The pharmaceutical industry, or at least a part of it as mentioned above, has proven that it cannot be trusted. Therefore the pharmaceutical industry needs to be strictly regulated.

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