

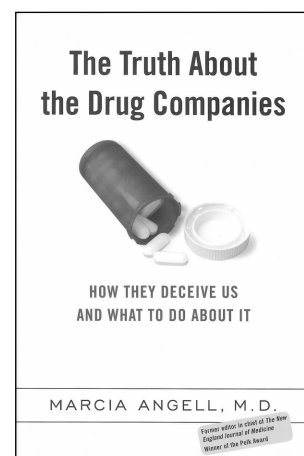
Book review

The truth about the drug companies: how they deceive us and what to do about it

Edited by Marcia Angell.

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It was in a stuffy lecture theatre in medical school that I first was taught to be suspicious about the pharmaceutical industry's intentions. The lecture was on basic cardiovascular pharmacology. Valiantly attempting to hold the attention of a group of postprandial medical students, the lecturer began to name as many beta-blockers as he could. Indicating the array of pharmacologically almost identical family members, he finished by highlighting how much metoprolol sounds like "me-too-prolol" – my introduction into the world of pharma-cynicism.

It is me-too drugs that provide some of the targets for the first chapters of Marcia Angell's book *The Truth About the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What To Do About It*. Editor at the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) for 20 years, she has been in an ideal position to observe the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry, the researchers and the doctors who prescribe the end-product. The aim of Angell's book is to expose the industry, along with its influence over the scientific and medical professions, as a malignant marketing machine for new, more expensive, drugs that provide little benefit, but huge profits.

First in the spotlight are the research and development budgets that big Pharma use to justify the high prices they pass on to the consumer. Angell eloquently points out that much of drug development is funded by the US tax payer already, as most researchers work at universities with NIH grants. The companies pick up the cost of bringing the drug to market, a not-insignificant burden, but not as high as they claim. Angell also makes much of the claim that the industry hides its marketing costs within the research and development budget.

Next in the crosshairs are those aforementioned me-too drugs. Angell reveals that of the 415 drugs approved by the FDA between 1998 and 2002, only 58 were what she calls innovative, meaning pharmacologically new entities providing some clinical benefit over existing drugs. She combines this with a discussion of the way drug companies re-label old drugs with dubious-sounding new indications and even new names, in order to extend their time on patent and consequently profit margins. Much is also made of the money spent on direct-to-consumer advertising which empowers patients to approach their physician for what they perceive to be the latest, most efficacious medicine for their ailment. Fortunately, such advertising remains illegal under European law, and Angell's account provides a salutary lesson in why it should remain so.

Advertising to doctors is common practice on both sides of the Atlantic though, and unsurprisingly this does not escape Dr Angell's piercing gaze. It is here, however, that her case against the drug companies is weaker. She describes the methods used by the industry to encourage doctors to prescribe their particular product (for example \$11 billion worth of free samples, "free" education and flights to conferences) but the responsibility of each individual doctor to critically appraise the products they administer is only considered fleetingly. After all, as prescribers of me-too drugs, doctors must bear some of the culpability for their financial success.

Conspicuous by its absence, is a chapter on the pharmaceutical industry's relationship with the major medical journals. The publication of prominent studies can be the difference between success and failure for a new drug. As an editor at NEJM, Angell must have had first hand experience of drug companies trying to exert

influence over publication, and it is a pity that she has chosen not to reveal these. In addition, while she cogently argues that the FDA and medical advisors should not accept industry funding, she makes no mention of a similar rule for medical journals.

A range of potential fixes is proposed, from creating centrally-funded establishments for drug studies, to changing patent laws, to ensure that new drugs provide additional benefit over existing ones, rather than simply providing increased revenue. The reader gets the feeling, however, that what cannot be so easily mended is the loss of altruism – the development of new drugs for the rewards of knowing that patients, rather than shareholders, are profiting.

All in all, Angell's book reads like a Michael Moore film views, drawing the reader in with

layer after layer of well-reasoned argument. She adds credibility by crediting the pharmaceutical industry where possible for its innovations, but in the final analysis, the book is a sad indictment on an industry that seems to have been overtaken by greed, with the collusion, knowingly or not, of government and the medical establishment. Although these are not necessarily new revelations, *The Truth About the Drug Companies* provides a coherent summary of the current role of the pharmaceutical industry in drug development and marketing, and a reminder to regulatory authorities and the medical profession of their obligation to ensure the licensing and prescription of efficacious, cost effective medicines.

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