

# why is america PRESC

**A** **MERICA IS  
ADDICTED TO  
DRUGS** and it's  
perfectly legal.

Behemoth pharmaceutical companies are creating a country of hypochondriacs, and shelling out medications for every imaginable imperfection. These drugs are meant to keep us thriving, yet millions of Americans are getting sicker and thousands are dying. The war on drugs is raging at this very moment, but the government is ignoring an even more significant problem. With more people dying from adverse reactions to prescription medications than from illicit drug use, perhaps it's time to widen the scope and put "Big Pharma" in its place.

## **the overmedication of America**

In 2002 alone, Americans filled 3,130,000,000 prescriptions, an increase of 140,000,000 from 2001. Believe it or not, children account for 7 percent of antidepressant drug use. It's truly alarming that kids – with their natural wonder at the world and no mortgage payments to scream at – allegedly need drugs that alter brain chemistry in order to feel more cheerful. This segment of the pharmaceutical market is swelling and raking in huge profits.

With the "Just Say No to Drugs" and D.A.R.E. campaigns, adults are sending conflicting messages to our youngsters. Don't touch marijuana or sniff glue, but you can have some Ritalin to make you sit perfectly still while Miss Hilda lectures about ancient Greek pottery.

"You see all these kids at the nearest 7-Eleven downing Big Gulps and Mars Bars before going home to sit in front of the television for hours on end," says Jon Barron, world-renowned neutraceutical researcher, and member of the Medical Advisory Board of The Health and Sciences Institute. "And you wonder why they won't sit still in class?" Shame on parents who turn parental duties over to that plastic orange bottle of pills.

"There is always a time and a place that a person will need to take a prescription drug, but the bottom line is that no drug can replace a lifetime of healthy choices," says Laurie Steelsmith, a naturopathic doctor based in Hawaii. "Prescription medications should be reserved for when we really need it, or while lifestyle changes are

implemented, and then the goal is to discontinue taking the drug."

Amazingly, some authorities actually believe that the astronomical dispensing of drugs, in the name of health, is proportionate to the real medical needs of ailing Americans. "Lifestyle changes are important, but can never replace medication," says Peter Pitts, lead advisor and counselor on pharmaceutical and food public policy issues, and former Associate Commissioner for External Relations to the FDA. "Hundreds of millions of hypertensives (people with high blood pressure) go undiagnosed all over the world. These people need medication to survive."

Anyone with common sense will agree with that. A person who refuses to exercise, lose weight and eat beneficial foods certainly needs drugs to keep the high blood pressure from rupturing a blood vessel in the brain. AIDS patients couldn't live without a daily cocktail of powerful drugs. Organ transplant recipients must take anti-rejection drugs indefinitely. Special drugs slow the progress of Alzheimer's disease and ease side effects of chemotherapy.

But it's an outright travesty when people are convinced to take drugs for the following "conditions": fidgeting too much; having to check the stove eight times before being assured it's turned off; eating something that didn't quite agree with them; not falling asleep within 20 minutes of hitting the pillow; or floundering in the intimacy department. Ironically, impotence is a known side effect of some prescription medications!

These, and many other conditions to



# obsessed with RESCRIPTION DRUGS?

which there is "a drug for," are not life or limb threatening. Of course, it's not only easier to take a pill for "nerves" or "stress" than it is to give the brain cells an old-fashioned workout by deliberating on some creative problem-solving, but many people are actually convinced that their "condition" necessitates pharmaceutical treatment, thanks to relentless marketing, plus the physicians who find it easier to write out a prescription than to provide jittery patients with a list of support groups. Often, doctors reap financial perks when writing out prescriptions.

"It seems that people in this country, with the help of clever marketing, have come to believe in a magic bullet that will rid them of their problems," says Barron. "What is unfortunate is that the majority of available drugs treat only the symptoms and not the root problem." Take high blood pressure medication, for example. Physicians seek to reduce the pressure and push various numbers into acceptable ranges, but the arteries that initiated the excess pressure are still clogged. What happens then, when the body adapts and the medicine is no longer viable? Coronary bypass?

There are plenty of alternatives to drugs than Big Pharma would have you believe. Since time began, medicine men and women have been mixing natural herbs that have been proven safe and effective for a great many people. Somehow, though, these methods are considered quackery and aren't given the kudos they deserve. It seems strange that naturally occurring, non-dangerous substances are demonized, yet prescription meds with the potential to end

lives are placed at the forefront.

Why take a potentially fatal high cholesterol medication when there are less harmful herbal and dietary remedies out there that act in the same fashion? Because that's what we've been told to do (and there's not much fortune-making potential from red rice yeast or bentonite). "I often have patients who want to get onto a prescription medication that they've heard about on T.V.," says Steelsmith. "Usually they want a quick fix, and these commercials offer not only freedom from pain, depression, etc., but, as you know, they also offer beautiful fields of flowers, butterflies, and gorgeous sunsets ... and of course, a lot of good-looking smiling people."

One of the biggest selling classes of drugs (the absolute biggest are the cholesterol-lowering) are the anti-depressants and anti-anxieties. Barron says these keep many people from dealing with the causes of their problems. Though some forms of depression are linked to chemical imbalance in the brain, which can cause sufferers to be bedridden or incapacitated, it's a sorry fact that quite a few physicians prescribe these drugs to people whose depression, or feelings of doldrums or anxiety, are clearly triggered by a very identifiable life circumstance – and not necessarily upheaving such as death of a loved-one, but sometimes simple job-related angst or trouble with the neighbors. The message that patients are receiving is that by taking a capsule, you can become blissfully numb to your bickering teenagers.

As a bonus to these drugs, you may also experience insomnia, tremors, confusion,

decreased libido or mania. Perhaps the presumed benefit does outweigh the negatives in some cases, but many of these medications just mask the symptoms without addressing the cause. Joining a support group, taking up yoga, martial arts or power lifting can have the same soothing effect on a harried soul as taking a chemical – without the risk of toxic side effects.

Barron explains, "People are made to believe that if you have a bad day for example, or a bad series of days, that they must be clinically depressed and require medication. Sadness is a natural aspect of human existence."

So is a little disagreement here and there with something you ate. Another booming aspect of the pharmaceutical industry are over-the-counter drugs for a wide range of "discomforts" including heartburn. The TV commercials and print ads for these are almost as frequent as the ones for cholesterol-lowering drugs. "One of the tenets of natural medicine is to listen to what the body and mind are trying to tell us when things go out of balance," says Steelsmith. "These signs and symptoms are the wisdom of the body. They are red flags that something is out of balance. To take a drug to cover up these signs is like shooting the messenger rather than treating the cause of the problem. Correcting the cause of the imbalance is the only way to truly restore health."

It's not shocking that the pharmaceutical industry comprises some of the most profitable corporations in the world. It's hard to make it through 10 minutes of a television program without being bombarded by offers



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to "increase this" and "decrease that." Majestic scenery and catchy music often accompany these ads – the power of advertising on the gullible mind strikes like a freshly sharpened axe. Big Pharma claimed \$251.8 billion in sales for 2005 alone. As one of the wealthiest nations in the world, we're also apparently the sickest of the sick, with people getting prescriptions like they get the morning newspaper.

Drug companies are regularly making headlines (particularly the latest class action lawsuits) these days. Concerns of safety, quality and affordability arise despite claims boasting their hand in increasing U.S. mortality and life satisfaction rates. The bottom line, however, lies with the word "corporation." Shareholders invest in corporations in hopes of beefing up bank financial statements, not to donate funds or break even. If corporations fail in this task, shareholders take their money elsewhere and the company falters. This means that corporations sometime employ unscrupulous tactics to fuel financial gains, and the people they claim to help become dollar signs followed by lots and lots of digits.

## food and drug administration

According to the FDA website, its mission is "to promote and protect the public health by helping safe and effective products reach the market in a timely way; to monitor products for continued safety after they are in use; and to help the general public get the accurate, science-based information needed to improve health."

The FDA analyzes drug company-supplied science-based and clinically tested evidence for the efficacy and safety of new drugs. Companies hoping to make plenty of money off a newfangled drug provide the FDA all necessary documentation to prove its viability.

FDA scientists do not perform tests (until many drug-related fatalities are reported); they simply evaluate drug company-supplied information. Anyone familiar with the legal system knows that a case may be won or lost based on how information is presented. It might seem, then, that a goal-oriented go-getter of a pharmaceutical company might utilize similar tactics to cleverly slant findings in its favor. It is true that the drug industry uses outside, private research firms to perform tests, but the same private research firm also receives a hefty paycheck from industry for completion of the project.

Wouldn't it seem more logical that a third-party, non-objective government-mandated agency like the FDA be responsible for performing tests that conclusively prove the safety and quality of a particular drug?

According to Pitts, the government agency doesn't have the bandwidth to perform its own tests. "It's easy to say, 'The FDA should do this and the FDA should do that.' However, effective research can't be done without money," he says.

## death by prescription drugs

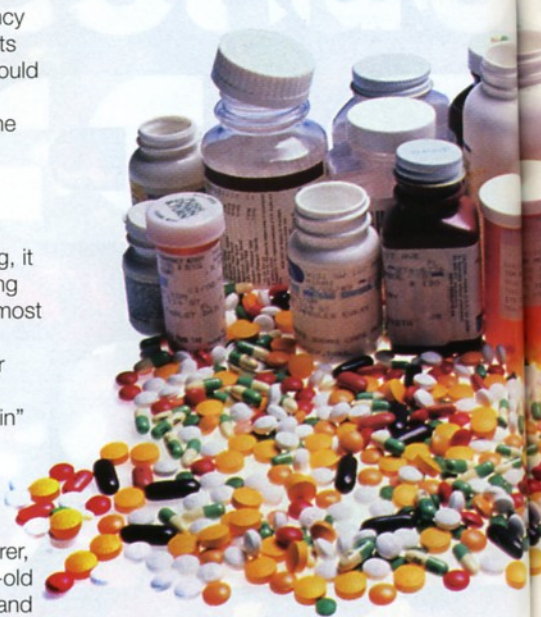
For every relatively safe, lifesaving drug, it seems there are five more that are making headlines for causing harm. One of the most famous cases against pharmaceutical companies involves Vioxx, a pain-reliever designed for arthritis sufferers – but also heavily used by people experiencing "pain" in general, such as soft-tissue back problems that can be eradicated – or significantly improved – with the right exercise program.

In 2005, a jury found Vioxx manufacturer, Merck, negligent in the death of 59-year-old triathlete and marathoner Robert Ernst, and was ordered to pay his widow \$253 million in damages. FDA studies estimate that 27,785 heart attacks and deaths resulted from use of the drug (other studies place that number at about 80,000-100,000, with 30 to 40 percent resulting in death), but not before the drug garnered Merck \$2.8 billion in revenue in 2003 alone.

It's interesting to note that in 2000, a study called VIGOR was performed to compare gastrointestinal events in patients randomly assigned to Vioxx, or another pain-reliever, Naprosyn. Study authors reported that those taking Vioxx had fewer incidences of side effects such as stomach ulcers and bleeding, but it did show a great increase in heart attacks among participants. This information was forwarded to the FDA, but somehow the drug remained on the market until 2004. So much for helping "the general public get the accurate, science-based information needed to improve health."

Another case against Big Pharma involves the drug Neurontin (side effects include dizziness, drowsiness, swelling of the extremities, hostility and suicide) and its manufacturer, Parke-Davis. Approved by the FDA for treatment of epilepsy, Neurontin has gained an "off-label" buzz for treatment of such conditions as pain neuropathy, generic muscle aches, migraines and bipolar disorder. The term off-label is used to describe treatment options not formally approved by the FDA. It's unlawful for pharmaceutical companies to promote off-label uses; however, physicians are given the freedom to prescribe any drug for any purpose they see fit.

How doctors learn of off-label uses is a very touchy subject that has undergone



intense scrutiny of late, especially in regards to Neurontin. A 2001 study published in the *American Journal of Medicine* contends that Parke-Davis allegedly paid physicians to tout off-label benefits of the drug to colleagues. The same study found that doctors who attended dinner meetings hosted by the company were 70 percent more likely to offer Neurontin prescriptions than those not present. Despite \$2.8 billion in annual sales, Parke-Davis pled guilty to illegal marketing of the drug for off-label uses in 2004 and was fined \$430 million. It's reported that 90 percent of prescriptions for Neurontin were written for off-label purposes. There are also lawsuits pending that claim the drug heightens the likelihood of suicide in persons with bipolar disorder.

Remember American Airlines Flight 587, that crashed in 2001 shortly after takeoff from JFK airport in New York – killing all 260 people on board? The U.S. was almost at a standstill as the government performed investigation after investigation (and rightfully so) to determine the cause of the accident. Media companies went into full throttle. Yet 300 people die daily from adverse drug (medication) reactions (ADRs) without so much as a peep from the government or media conglomerates!

According to a 1998 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), 106,000 people die annually from ADRs, which translates to roughly 300 deaths per day. Why isn't this the focus of major investigation?

JAMA also estimates that 2,216,000 people suffer severe but non-lethal ADRs annually. In a system of checks and balances, where government agencies are



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created to protect its people from death and disease, how is it possible that dangerous drugs make it through rigorous testing and out to market?

Pitts argues that dangerous drugs don't kill people, misguided or uninformed physicians do. "The doctor has the responsibility to disclose information to the patient," says Pitts. "All drugs have risks and benefits, so it's up to the physician to interpret materials provided by the FDA and then make sound judgments on treatment options." Unfortunately, the developing technology that can detect if a patient might have a serious adverse reaction to a drug, is not readily available to the average physician, nor is this technology nearly as simple and accurate as taking a blood pressure reading. Thus, the medical doctor's approach is generic, based only on information provided by the drug company. No matter how meticulous the physician is, there's no way he or she can know in advance how a patient's chemistry will react to a drug.

## the fda and big pharma: a curious relationship?

A *New York Times* article published early in 2005 stated, "Researchers with ties to industry commonly serve on the Food and Drug Administration advisory panels, but their presence has long been a contentious issue." The article went on to say that upon seeking approval for pain relievers such as Celebrex, Bextra and Vioxx, 10 of 32 government advisors who endorsed the drugs previously acted as consultants for the manufacturers. Had these 10 voters recused themselves from voting, Bextra

(withdrawn in 2005 due to high risk of stroke and heart attack) would have been withdrawn, and Vioxx would have been removed from market.

A survey in 2006 of 1,000 FDA scientists returned alarming results. Distributed by the Union of Concerned Scientists and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, the survey questioned scientists about FDA research practices. According to the survey, one in five scientists stated, "I have been asked, for non-specific reasons, to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information or my conclusions in an FDA scientific document." 60 percent of respondents claimed that they were aware of instances in which commercial interests had "inappropriately induced or attempted to induce the reversal, withdrawal or modification of FDA determinations or actions."

How does the pharmaceutical industry have such a crushing hold on the FDA? 251.8 billion George Washingtons, that's how.

## go natural: the best medicine ever

It's time to kick the drug habit and take back some power. Invest in the time to learn about your particular malady and research it to see if there are less harmful means, that are also just as effective as drugs or even more effective, for treatment. Seek the advice of licensed alternative therapists. There are a variety of non-invasive, less potentially damaging treatments that have successfully reduced or completely eradicated disease and infirmity. Many more of these cases exist than are documented; perhaps because conventional medicine doesn't like competition.

Naturopathic doctors seek to restore the body's balance instead of covering up the symptoms. They urge nutrition, dietary and lifestyle modifications and use herbal medicine, homeopathy, physical medicine and nutritional supplements to attain optimal health. Herbalists are another form of holistic practitioner; the power of herbs has been well-documented.

Chiropractic isn't just about cracking backs. Chiropractic is the specialty of treating the entire body, inside and out, without drugs and without surgery – which often requires prescription drugs to recover from.

Acupuncture is another method gaining recognition for treating back pain, depression, breast cancer, schizophrenia and more.

Orthomolecular psychiatry treats mental conditions with natural supplements rather than with drugs. For example, numerous, meticulously-conducted studies have shown

that therapeutic doses of vitamin B-3 have dissolved symptoms of schizophrenia in some patients.

Though sometimes only the symptoms of a disorder are targeted in alternative approaches, such as with vitamin B-3 and schizophrenia, keep in mind that the root causes of some of these disorders are still a mystery.

Science has proven that practices such as yoga, tai chi and meditation do lower blood pressure. Registered dietitians develop nutrient-rich eating programs, while personal trainers help their trainees strengthen the cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and immune systems.

In fact, the average personal-training client is not a sick individual. This indicates that numerous sick people are missing out on what can be a fabulous part of their treatment or disease management. By no means should a person whose doctor has recommended bed rest sign up for personal training. But when ailing people, who are given the green light to exercise, invest in personal training, the results can be dramatic. A qualified personal trainer will work with the trainee's physician in developing the best exercise regimen for that person.

The list of natural options goes on and on. Search "alternative therapies" on the Internet to research the many natural treatments that the pharmaceutical industry may not want you to get wind of. After all, suppose every person in this nation quit smoking, adhered to regular exercise, a plant-based diet, purified water, supplements proven to positively impact health, and detoxification practices such as periodic two-day fasts consisting of only fresh vegetable juice. This would eventually put a crater-sized dent in Big Pharma's profits.

America doesn't have to stay under the industry thumb any longer. And don't take the passive approach just because your health insurance foots 100 percent of the pharmacy bill. Be proactive, and sooner or later Big Pharma will have to succumb to the will of the people. It's obvious that the pharmaceutical industry and the FDA can't be fully trusted, so grab the initiative.

Jon Barron asserts, "People seem to believe that no matter how they live their lives, the physician will be able to 'fix' them. It's time we take responsibility for ourselves and stop blaming outside sources for our problems. If people want to be healthy, they need to lead healthy lives. The people are going to change the way medication is viewed in this country, not the companies pushing it. If there is no need for them, they will not exist." 🌱