

On the Take: How Medicine's Complicity with Big Business Can Endanger your Health

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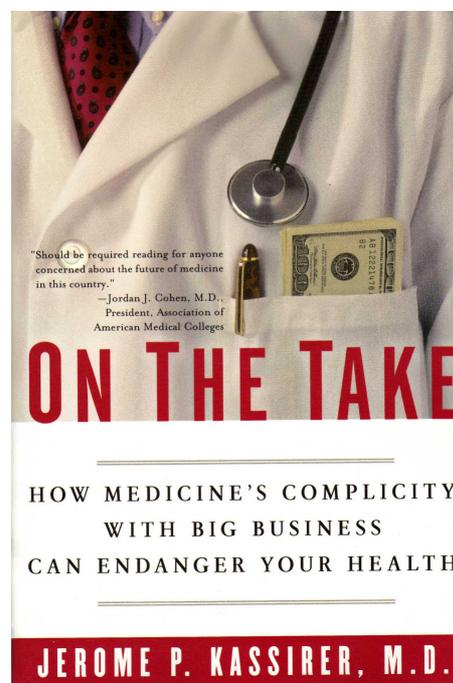
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The pharmaceutical industry, like any other industry in the capitalist context in which we live, exists to produce profits. To attain this aim, its companies invest in human resources, new technologies, the development of healthcare products and, of course, in advertising and marketing.

The development of thousands of new medications and health products achieved over recent years has undeniably helped improve the quality of life of human beings due to the possibility of curing a wide variety of diseases, controlling conditions that were once liable to cause infirmity and early death (such as arterial hypertension and diabetes) and even eradicating infections with the use of efficient vaccines, as in the case of smallpox. When we turn, though, to the profit and marketing linked to human health, the reactions of various sectors of the public are much more polemical. Are the manufacturers of drugs, vaccines and health products more concerned with the quality of what they sell than the profit they can obtain from sales? Are the tests and trials manipulated for the products to appear better than they actually are?

In relation to advertising strategies, the questions become even more distressing: are healthcare professionals, in whom we place our trust, manipulated by advertising tricks to prescribe a specific product? Regulatory agencies of various countries, including Brazil, have



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focused on this question and issued guidelines on the degree to which it is 'acceptable' for a doctor to receive gifts from a drugs manufacturer such as invitations to events, sponsorships for conference trips, payment for consultancy and other activities that can be seen as mechanisms for making a medical professional 'sympathize' more with one product and prescribe it more frequently than others, irrespective of the needs of the patients under their care.

In this book, the author, a former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, a high-profile scientific journal known globally for its seriousness and competence, examines the relations between the pharmaceutical industry and doctors based on cases occurring in the United States, reported in various media channels. Unfortunately most of these references are unable to be checked, such as those publicized in the American media. In the author's view, the money coming from the pharmaceutical industry is capable of affecting not only the individual judgment of a medical professional, but also of interfering in the information transmitted to other doctors in teaching institutions, congresses and even in the policy of renowned scientific journals (like the *New England Journal of Medicine*).

In the USA, medicine is basically private, which creates a type of relationship between the different sectors of society involved in healthcare than cannot be extrapolated to other countries where the reality is very different, such as Brazil, where the vast majority of the population receives care via the public health system, funded and managed by the government. Here medications are prescribed by their generic name and patients receive the product bought by the healthcare institutions, a system that reduces the capacity of manufacturers to influence the drug prescribers. Of course part of Brazil's population also has private health insurance, representatives from the pharmaceutical industry visit doctors at their workplaces, many professionals receive gifts, meals and sponsorship for trips, but at a much lower scale than that described by the author in relation to the US.

Analyzing the facts, the author concludes that the seduction of the money coming from the pharmaceutical industry is capable of affecting not only the clinical practices of medical professionals in isolation, but the integrity of scientific, governmental and teaching institutions, as well as the outcome of scientific research, due to their direct or indirect acquisition of material. On this point, the author does not spare agencies such as

the FDA, the NIH and other American institutions that employ professional workers who also act as consultants for the pharmaceutical industry or even hold jobs within these institutions and seem to have little interest in regulating these relations that range from the offer of gifts to sizeable quantities of money.

Various cases are cited over the course of the book to demonstrate the links between medicine and the pharmaceutical industry, spanning from the routine visits made by sales representatives to present the advantages of their products, offering small gifts or even trips, to the direct payment of consultants to divulge the product or a share in company profits through shares or royalties. The form in which the author narrates the facts and his conclusions lend the text a fairly pessimistic air in terms of the nature of human beings, as though all were equally guided merely by the attempt to obtain personal and financial profits.

The book provides an interpretation of the American reality, one difficult to generalize, although it offers people from any country, including Brazil, the chance to reflect on the theme: could the same be happening in Brazil despite its essentially public form of healthcare? If so, how and to what extent? Most of the population relies on the public health system in which doctors who provide direct care to patients prescribe medications previously selected by specific authorities, distributed freely via national programs, based on data relating to efficiency, safety and costs. However, could these commissions that select the products be subject to the same type of manipulation by the pharmaceutical industry? And are the people who use private medicine, purchasing their medications in drugstores, being treated by medical professionals guided by personal interests, rather than by a concern with the health of their patients?

Reaching the end of the book, as human beings we can ask: are we creatures destined to be corrupt, who value personal profit above all else, irrespective of the well-being of our peers?

The book fulfils the role of making the reader reflect on polemical contemporary issues and how these can affect his or her life and that of others. However, the journalistic style, fairly unscientific and overly sensationalist, compromises the seriousness of the work, which also spares the author himself from the kind of accusations directed at his own colleagues, as though he alone were immune to such pressures. 