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“Why Wouldn’t I Use It?”: Purdue Pharmaceutical’s Push of Pills

Throughout the early 1940’s to mid 1960’s, the popular habit of smoking cigarettes was not only condoned, but advertised by doctors and lawmakers. With the support of medical professionals and non-restrictive advertisement laws, the widespread use of this deadly product exploded. The ‘Big Tobacco’ industry and the federal government made enormous amounts in profit and tax revenue. Numerous similarities can be found between the advertising of cigarettes and the prescription opioid, OxyContin. ‘Big Tobacco’ and the producer of OxyContin, Purdue Pharma (Hoffman and Williams Walsh), employed incredibly similar tactics to encourage the public to use their lethal products. By controlling the narrative about the potential dangers, and the addictive properties through their use of advertisements, both “Big Tobacco” and Purdue Pharmaceuticals accomplished their goals of inspiring the “why wouldn’t I use it” question in the consumers’ minds.

Through close manipulation of the public’s understanding about OxyContin, the entire nation, the United States, was deceived into believing that consuming the drug was as safe as it was effective. The misrepresentation of OxyContin in television commercials, magazine ads, branded promotional gifts and radio spots all painted a picture of a drug that would change lives for the better, through the popular tagline, “Remember, effective relief just takes two” (Kelvey). The language used in this tagline implies that the substance is safe due to the low

number of pills it takes to provide relief for a patient. What this phrase fails to mention is why it only "...just takes two" (Kelvey).

Rather than the desirable, immediately pain-free lifestyle that the Purdue Pharmaceutical ads promoted, the lives of millions were destroyed by addiction and overdose.

In conjunction with the jaded portrayal of OxyContin to the general public, a massive effort by the Big Pharma enterprise heavily promoted the drug to physicians capable of prescribing opioids. An article published by Smithsonian Magazine, highlights the persuasive methods employed by Purdue Pharmaceuticals to change prior attitudes about prescribing such strong painkillers. "The real fire... was a behind-the-scenes effort to establish a laxer attitude toward prescribing opioid medications generally, one which made regulators and physicians alike more accepting of OxyContin" (Kelvey). By convincing physicians that OxyContin was not only a safe, but better alternative to other painkillers, Purdue Pharmaceuticals single-handedly increased the quantity prescribed of their drug. Making OxyContin far more accessible for patients through sale tactics such as giving free sample coupons, (Kelvey) supplemented their push of pills on a nationwide scale.

By comparing a previous health crisis, the widespread use of cigarettes, it is apparent that advertising has had a major role in shaping the public's opinion of dangerous substances. The promotion of the life-threatening habit of smoking cigarettes perfectly mirrors the promotion of the drug OxyContin. Both cigarette producers and Purdue Pharmaceuticals launched a rhetorical approach in their advertisements to appeal to consumer logic. Both Philip Morris cigarettes and Purdue Pharmaceuticals paid and supported physicians in exchange for the ability to advertise a doctor's 'seal of approval'. An article published by History.com highlighting the unethical marketing strategy employed by Philip Morris cigarettes states: 'the Philip Morris company... ad

claim[ed] doctors had conducted a study showing ‘when smokers changed to Philip Morris, every case of irritation cleared completely and definitely improved.’ What it didn’t mention was that Philip Morris had sponsored those doctors” (Little). This back-alley control over the positive language that was being used in advertisements is identical to the crooked sales tactics used by Purdue Pharmaceuticals.

Mimicking the same tactic as the Philip Morris company, Purdue Pharmaceuticals also had their own privately funded physician, Dr. Sally Satel. The non-profit newsroom, ProPublica, exposed the convoluted relationship between OxyContin advocate Dr. Satel, and Purdue Pharmaceuticals for what it really was. Satel published numerous articles in support and defense of prescribing OxyContin as a safe pain management solution. To craft these seemingly credible arguments in support of the drug, Dr. Satel cited numerous studies and provided additional research from other doctors. The ProPublica article by David Armstrong, unearths Satel’s paid involvement with Purdue. Through close examination, it discovered that Satel’s cited sources and research were also funded by Purdue Pharmaceuticals (Armstrong). ‘Think Tanks’, doctors, and scientific researchers funded by the Big Pharma empire, were expected to produce evidence for reporters and healthcare professionals, like Satel, to use in hopes of swaying the public’s opinion and negating claims that the drug was highly addictive. These supposed “experts” in the field were paid to create intentionally biased content that would appear logical to the public due to the involvement of trusted medical professionals.

Following a tactical approach to downplay the addictive nature of OxyContin by Purdue Pharmaceuticals, it successfully manifested itself in the intended use section of the in package insert (“Dope Dealers with White Lab Coats” [00:07:19]). Purdue Pharmaceuticals deliberately wrote the literature about the drug to be vague, therefore allowing significant amounts of the

information to be left up to individual interpretation. According to the medication guide published by Purdue Pharma, "OxyContin is a strong prescription pain medicine... used to manage pain severe enough to require daily around-the-clock, long-term treatment with an opioid, when other pain treatments... do not treat your pain well enough or you cannot tolerate them" (Purdue Pharmaceuticals). Including language that can be perceived in numerous ways, such as the phrase "...do not treat your pain *well enough* or you cannot *tolerate* them" (Purdue Pharmaceuticals) allowed a network of corrupt physicians to justify their over-prescription of OxyContin.

There is an immense amount of power that exists in controlling the narrative of a lethal substance, especially when vast amounts of money are involved. In the case of Purdue Pharmaceuticals, their billion-dollar drug empire (Armstrong) relied on the forfeiture of pertinent information to the public, and the spread of *their* version of the truth. A quantitative measure of this deliberate, focused push of OxyContin is seen when "sales grew from \$48 million in 1996 to almost \$1.1 billion in 2000" (Van Zee). The drastic one billion 52 million dollar increase in gross profit far exceeds the average increase in revenue when ethical marketing tactics are employed. When examining the information provided in OxyContin advertisements, which was produced by Purdue Pharmaceuticals, there were no warnings indicating that even appropriate usage can lead to a devastating addiction.

The widespread and forceful push of prescription opioids by big pharmaceutical companies, such as Purdue Pharmaceuticals, resulted in a national opioid epidemic. Reformed drug advertisement laws and a monumental effort by the government judicial system as well as private sector drug addiction advocacy groups, sought to educate the public about the dangers of opioid usage. Unfortunately, these efforts have had little effect on curbing the rising number of

prescription drug overdose related deaths. Purdue Pharmaceuticals had a large involvement in creating this national health epidemic by not disclosing all information about their drug in advertisements, manufacturing their own research to influence public opinion and creating a vast network of corrupt physicians to prescribe large quantities of the incredibly dangerous drug. All of these factors played a part in creating the opioid epidemic that we struggle with today.

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