



Unhealthy Relationships

Medical research is becoming increasingly dependent on the pharmaceutical industry, and scientific coverage upon medical research. And is thus indirectly dependent on the pharmaceutical industry. Furthermore, they also meddle quite directly in advertising and PR in journalistic work.

By Torsten Engelbrecht

The analysis by the medical journalist turns out clearly: "We have become an overly-medicated society, in which the irrational belief prevails, that for every problem there is a pill", complains the Harvard medic Marcia Angell in a book about the pharmaceutical industry. This view, held by Angell, who was active in the editing of the professional journal *New England Journal of Medicine* for over two decades, from which two years were spent as chief editor, has been confirmed by a recent study by the British Parliament. According to this, the corporate centers of "Big Pharma" in the USA and Europe mobilize billions in contributions to scientists, doctors, civil servants, research work, scientific magazines, and ad campaigns in order to spread the belief that a new "miracle cure" for cancer, diabetes, or other diseases has been developed. That is until the "wonder drug" is then proven to be useless or even harmful, while at the same time prevention is given a raw deal.

This is so lucrative for the pharmaceutical industry that it has ascended to the most profitable of all branches in the past two decades. But then again, citizens struggle with rising health costs – without definitive advances being achieved or effective remedies even being able to be developed. An awkward situation, to which the media has also contributed. For they have played the role of "alter boy for medication manufacturers" all-too often, as Angell formulates, and passed on the message of "Big Pharma" to the public without criticism.

Top and Flop. One example is the arthritis medication Vioxx. Although its superiority was never proven and it costs many times more than competitive compounds, it has advanced in a short amount of time to a blockbuster hit since its market approval in May 1999. That is how a compound that generates a yearly volume of sales of a billion or more dollars is described. This was made possible through hundreds of millions of dollars in heavy ad campaigning, in which Vioxx was celebrated as a medicinal break-through – as well as through media reports that read like press announcements from the Vioxx manufacturer Merck far too often. In 2004 the big disillusionment appeared: Vioxx had to be pulled from the market, after which it had confirmed the suspicion that the compound can cause fatal heart attacks and strokes to some extent.

Those who watch the market closely realize that many compounds share in a fate similar to Vioxx – that is, their approval is only short-lived. Another example of this is the cholesterol reducer Baycol (Lipobay), approved around 1997 by Bayer, which the daily paper *Die Welt* still quoted as "Stock of the Day" in 2000, the year before its recall: "Michael Vara, analyst for the Bank of Commerce, didn't expect any unwanted surprises from the quarterly report and awarded Avelox and Baycol, Bayer-developed medications, as having an 'absolute blockbuster potential'."

Grandiose. Not any less risky: Media hype about alleged wonder cures, whose success is scarcely covered by the real situation. For example: cancer therapies. Cancer research is the most expensive of all medical sciences; since 1971, when Richard Nixon made propaganda for the fight against cancer, hundreds of billions of dollars have flowed into cancer research. Even back then the protagonists wholeheartedly advertised that within a few years a cure would be available – and even back then the media faithfully passed on this promise of healing to the public.

But nothing became of these, just like the countless other assurances of a break-through for cancer. "Instead, the number of cancer fatalities in industrial countries, also when readjusted to societal aging factors, have risen noticeably in the past three decades," says cancer expert Samuel Epstein. All the same, the media never tires of grabbing onto or even stepping up the promise of established cancer medicine. The online magazine *Spiegel Online* for example recently came up with the headline: "Insect blood helps in the fight against cancer". As a matter of fact, researchers are, however, just merely

“counting on” “being able to gain extracts for healing cancer”. The cancer compound Gleevec (Glivec) even appeared in the USA as a miracle cure in TV soaps. “Gleevec – the cancer killer” read the headline of a contribution on 3Sat, a German television channel, while the German magazine *Geo Wissen* searched for readers to put under its spell with the title “New Weapons to Fight Cancer” and maintained, under the reference of medical authority, that “molecular agents” like Glivec would “shut down cancer cells on target” and possibly herald “a new era of medicine”.

But in truth, the sensational “life-changing effects” sold by Gleevec and the other “designer drugs”, amongst others *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Quarks & Co*, amount to effects barely occurring even one time within a few weeks or months. And even those only related to very specific types of tumors, while were practically ineffective for the more serious tumors, which make up 90 percent of tumor cases. “And at the same time they have shocking side effects, such as bleeding or perforation of the intestinal tract,” tells the renowned genomic researcher George Miklos. “Are these the kind of advancements that patients really want? At costs of several tens of thousands of dollars per treatment?”

A Question of Faith. But critics like Miklos are ignored by the medical establishment and thus also widely by the media. An explanation for this is “our faith in science and its ability to heal”, the US media scientist Michael Tracey states. “This belief is the new secular theology, in which scientists have taken over the function of priesthood.” A faith, that is so deeply ingrained in us that we are not just looking for healing through “miracle cures”, but downright demand them. “The core of this web consisting of feelings and wishes is the ever-more-powerful part of global economy: the ‘medicinal-industrial complex’. A term created not really by left radicals but rather a former publisher of the *New England Journal of Medicine*”, says Tracey. Within this medicinal-industrial complex a promise itself exists, which apparently has also been internalized by journalists. “Just make money available and science will deliver a cure,” as the immunology professor Edward Golub writes in his book “The Limits of Medicine”.

Medical authorities are accepted as altruistic truth-seekers in a manner of speaking. This was pushed to the limit by AIDS. “First came God, then came Gallo”, wrote the *LA Times* for example while the Berlin *Tageszeitung*, a daily newspaper, made David Ho out to be the “long-awaited Messiah of the AIDS scene”. These statements alone, a few of many of such verbalizations of noticeable devoutness, led to the fact that even scandals such as the case of Vioxx do not cause an upset any more. Even more, cases such as these are being interpreted more and more as extremely uncommon exceptions.

Thereby journalistic skepticism mounted. The fact that fraud is also prevalent in science led not only the science historian Horace Judson, author of “The Great Betrayal. Fraud in Science”, into this field. This was also recently circumstantiated in a survey published by *nature*, where a third of researchers admitted to malpractice, for instance the repression of inconvenient data. The weekly paper *Die Zeit* induced then from the sentence: “That shows that the reputation of science is threatened not just by individual black sheep.” Until this knowledge is put out into the media, much time will probably pass. Until then, the mass media will continue to prefer adopting the content from professional magazines, especially from *nature* or *Science*, and that is, unchecked – the journalists simply just assume that content of the journals has a satisfactory quality check to back them up. But the fact is that professional magazines cannot, however, give such a quality guarantee.

A Conflict of Interests. Just recently, financial conflicts of interest are strongly undercutting the independence of the research establishment, which is becoming increasingly more ruled by the pharmaceutical industry – as is the credibility of the professional magazine, in which the results of scientific establishment land. “In how studies are engaged, the researchers, who are financially bound to caring for the company, strongly tend to report positively about the products of the targeted firm, as scientists without economic entanglement,” says Angell. She maintains that it is urgently necessary that journalists regularly broach the issue of such financial dependencies.

As well as acting with utmost care. Genomic researcher George Miklos: “Just think that the largest fields in medicine today are stamped with the pursuit of glory, copious stock share options, topmost lucrative incomes from blockbuster medications, scenes on ‘Larry King Live’ or the appearance on the front page of *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *Spiegel*; this can mean just one thing for the mass media: What counts is to apply always the highest standards for interpreting data and to exercise the strictest fact-checking.”

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