Pond-Scum Pharmaceuticals (aka Valeant) Hits a New Low

By Josh Bloom — October 12, 2016

If this keeps up, I'm gonna run out of insults. Which is not terribly different than Don Rickles (1) running out of insults, and he made a living from it. But, I have better material to work with, courtesy of Pond Scum Pharmaceutical (PCS)—previously known as Valeant.

I thought that "one step below head lice on the food chain of life [1]" was at least adequate, but I'm both shocked and saddened to find out that even this fell short. Since giving up is antithetical to my very being, please indulge me as I try out a few more. If you want to vote for your favorite, it will be greatly appreciated. I take my work seriously:

- Satan's Spawn, Inc.
- We Don't Give S#### about Your Kids Dying From Lead Poisoning, LLC
- Jerck (with apologies to Merck)
- Charles Manson Medical Group
- Hitler HealthCare

OK, now I feel better. Let's take a look at what these stupid jackasses did this time.

Although statistics vary widely, and are determined, at least in part, by changing definitions (2), The CDC determined in 2012 that between 77,000 and 255,000 children had high levels of lead, and that many of them are undiagnosed. The change could raise the count to 450,000 cases. Whatever the "real" numbers are, children are still being poisoned when they are exposed to too much lead. They often eat lead paint.
Special Offer! If you want to win a prize of some undetermined value (and don’t expect too much), explain why kids like to eat lead paint. See quiz below.

What did Valeant do this time? Ed Silverman, the Encyclopedia Britannica of all matters pharmaceutical, wrote the following [2] in his long-running Pharmalot column, which is now published on STAT.

After resolving manufacturing problems that caused shortages, Valeant pursued the hallmark strategy that made it infamous — taking sky-high price hikes. Before Valeant took control, the list price for a package of [calcium EDTA] vials had been stable at $950. But in January 2014, Valeant boosted the price to $7,116. By December 2014, several more increases took the price to $26,927, according to Truven Health Analytics.

Calcium EDTA (simply another form of EDTA- not important), although long touted by quacks as chelation therapy for everything from cancer cures to eliminating autism, does have a legitimate use: binding to heavy metals, and eliminating them from the body. Thus it is used as an antidote for legitimate heavy metal poisoning, such as lead, when it is present in levels that can cause harm. So, despite the fact that it is heavily promoted by charlatans for nonexistent “diseases,” it is a life-saving drug. When used against lead.

If the price hikes that Silverman revealed above haven’t already made you furious, consider the following:
Calcium EDTA pricing. Source: Sigma-Aldrich catalog.

Sigma-Aldrich is the world's biggest provider of research chemicals. So, it is not the least bit surprising that they sell calcium EDTA. Look at the prices. You can buy one kilogram from the company for $333, or 0.030 cents per milligram (3). How much do you need to treat lead poisoning [3]?

Although the dose required depends upon the body surface area [4] of the child, the daily dose of calcium EDTA for a two-year old would be about 750 milligrams. [5]

What does 750 mg of calcium EDTA cost if you buy it from the research chemical supplier Sigma-Aldrich? A small (one kilogram) bottle costs $333, or $0.33 per gram. Even at this price, a single dose of the raw chemical (4) would be $0.25. But bulk rates for chemicals can be 1000-times less than that [6] of a small bottle that is used for research. Assuming that this factor is even remotely accurate, then the cost of material for a single dose is somewhere around 25 cents. Valeant is charging $27,000. Lovely.

Hope you guys (can't) sleep at night. Perhaps you will need a $500 sleeping pill that costs five cents to make.

Bunch of vultures. (5)

**Quiz: Why do kids eat lead paint? (No Wiki, please). Prize for winner to be determined, however, I can assure you that it will contain no lead.**
Notes:

(1) For all of you who are younger than yours truly (this is a very large number), Don Rickles became famous for his comic insults, earning him names, such as "The Merchant of Venom." Wikipedia [7] gives a good summary of Rickles.

(2) Keep in mind that "no safe level of lead" is not only a fallacy, but an impossibility. As Paracelsus (mercifully short for Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim) wrote [8] in the 16th century, 'Alle Ding sind Gift und nichts ohn' Gift; allein die Dosis macht, das ein Ding kein Gift ist," which unless you are on Final Jeopardy can safely be interpreted as "the dose makes the poison. There is no poison on earth that can do any harm if your body has one molecule of it floating around.

(4) It is unfair to directly compare the price of the material that Sigma-Aldrich sells to pharmaceutical grade material. It will almost certainly be more. How much more? I am waiting for a price quote for bulk material from the company.

(5) Important! Here is just one more reason that you cannot lump together generic drug companies with those that spend billions doing innovative research, any more than you compare a bear with a Teddy Bear. When politicians do this, they are intentionally misleading you.