Opioid Crisis: Purdue Pharma Got What It Deserved

By Alex Berezow, PhD — October 22, 2020

Purdue Pharma will pay an $8 billion fine and shut down. Finally, justice has been served, though far too late for the thousands of addicted or dead Americans whose problems began with OxyContin.

Our resident chemist, Dr. Josh Bloom, has followed the opioid crisis for several years. He was the first to raise the alarm that opioid overdoses and deaths were being driven largely by fentanyl, not Vicodin or other prescription pills.

This is still the case. A new CDC report concludes that 85% of overdose deaths involve the street drugs fentanyl, cocaine, heroin, and/or methamphetamine. About 21% of deaths involve prescription opioids, but it should be noted that many of these deaths also involved other drugs, like fentanyl. Less than 10% of drug overdose deaths are due to prescription opioids alone.

But that's not the story that the media or politicians want to tell. Instead, they want to blame somebody, and doctors and Big Pharma became the whipping boy. This has resulted in disastrous policies that didn't slow down the number of opioid deaths and simultaneously prevented chronic pain patients from getting the medicine they need to survive. Instead of learning that lesson, we are still getting ridiculous policy proposals that aren't addressing the real problem, which is mostly illicit fentanyl and other street drugs.

Purdue Pharma Got What It Deserved

Having said all that, there is one notable exception to the above narrative: Purdue Pharma. This
company played a key role in driving the opioid crisis, which can be seen in this timeline [5] that we wrote previously. Specifically, the company marketed the opioid OxyContin as less addictive than other opioids, which was an utter lie. Dave Finch, a drug law reform advocate, describes [6] what happened next:

Pill mills opened up in several states and pushed the pills out by the millions knowing they were intended to be used or resold for recreational use. The research on which Purdue had relied was found to be flawed and the company was eventually fined over 600 million dollars. Prescribing patterns by doctors continued for years and many honestly prescribed pills also entered the market. It took the DEA and the medical profession time to catch on. Walgreen [sic] and other outlets were frequently robbed, not for cash, but for pills. The opioid epidemic was in full swing.

Finch goes on to explain that by the time the government and doctors caught on, recreational users had moved on to other drugs, namely heroin and fentanyl. Thus, it was easy to predict that further crackdowns on prescription painkillers wouldn't just be useless but harmful to chronic pain patients.

Now, it has been announced that Purdue Pharma will pay an $8 billion fine and shut down [7]. Finally, justice has been served, though far too late for the thousands of addicted or dead Americans whose problems began with OxyContin.

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[2] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a1.htm