Henry Miller on Marcia Angell in WSJ

By ACSH Staff — August 25, 2004

ACSH Director Dr. Henry I. Miller takes on former New England Journal of Medicine editor Dr. Marcia Angell in his Wall Street Journal review of her new book, The Truth About the Drug Companies. The book attacks the pharmaceutical industry -- a reminder that the charges often heard from conspiracy theorists about medical journal editors being mere tools of the pharmaceutical industry are false. Miller counters Angell's criticisms with some perspective about how bad things were in past decades, without some of the industry's recent innovations. He notes, for instance, that leukemia was a death sentence in the mid-50s:

A half-century of new drugs has changed all that. Blood-related malignancies such as leukemia and lymphoma are now among the most curable forms of cancer. Similar treatment breakthroughs have occurred for arthritis, hypertension, and cardiac disease, and new vaccines have virtually eradicated many dreaded childhood illnesses.

Such success has not spared the pharmaceutical industry its share of criticism...[Angell] accuses the drug industry of profiteering, of making itself "a marketing machine to sell drugs of dubious benefit" and of using "its wealth and power to co-opt every institution that might stand in its way, including the U.S. Congress, the FDA, academic medical centers, and the medical profession itself." She believes that the industry "feeds off the NIH" and that new drugs "nearly always stem from publicly supported research." She blames the industry, "corrupted by easy profits and greed," for the paucity of genuinely innovative and affordable new drugs.

How persuasive is she? In 1999, the National Institutes of Health investigated whether its research funding commonly leads to the development of new drugs, the profits from which taxpayers might be entitled to share. Of 47 drugs that had earned revenues of $500 million or more, NIH support had figured significantly in only four.

Dr. Angell's denunciation plays down the drug companies' huge investments in research and development...

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