



Transcript of podcast interview with Melody Petersen, author of *Our Daily Meds: How the Pharmaceutical Companies Transformed Themselves Into Slick Marketing Machines and Hooked the Nation on Prescription Drugs*

One of the main points of your book is that the pharmaceutical industry's deceptive marketing practices go beyond the direct-to-consumer advertising that most of us are familiar with. Would you share some of these unseen tactics?

Oh, absolutely. You know, it's really the scope of the drug industry's promotional campaigns that is frightening and is why I wrote the book. Everyone knows about the TV ads, but it's really so much bigger than that. For one thing, most of the marketing dollars actually go into the pockets of our physicians, so when the ad says "Ask your doctor about drug A or drug B," the drug company has already been there and made sure that your doctor is ready to prescribe that drug.

It's hard to overstate how dangerous that is, because doctors are supposed to be the gate keepers, they're supposed to be the independent medical professionals that make sure you don't get a drug you don't need, but now most of the doctors in America take money or gifts from the pharmaceutical industry. There was a survey last year that found that nine out of 10 doctors recently had taken gifts or cash from the drug industry and some take hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in consulting fees and speaking fees.

So we're talking about more than pencils and notepads and things like that?

Absolutely. It goes far beyond that. I wrote the book because when I was writing stories for the *New York Times* about the pharmaceutical industry, I kept learning things that were just very troubling. For instance, as a journalist, you're always looking for objective sources of information. When I started to write about the drug companies, I quickly found I couldn't find medical experts who weren't working for the drug industry. Most of the medical experts, the professors of medicine at our universities, they have some sort of financial relationship with one or 10 or 20 drug companies. So that was—I was amazed and actually troubled by that.

Then I learned that many of the articles I was reading in medical journals hadn't actually been written by the doctor or group of doctors whose names were on those articles. They'd actually been written by Madison Avenue advertising agencies working for the drug industry, and the drug company had just hired these doctors to put their names on as authors.

That seems to me one of the most shocking things in the book, that these ostensibly professional journals are actually being written by people with—is it limited medical experience, or are these former doctors who are writing for the advertising agencies?

Some of the writers do have some sort of medical degree, but the problem here is that it's driven by marketing. It's the ad agency and the marketing executives inside the drug industry who are doing this first draft, and then perhaps the doctor who has been hired to be the named author on the article will change the draft to his or her thinking. But the problem is the marketers are editing every line of this article, and they can add things to it, make sure that if the article's on a new drug, they can say it was very effective, they can say the side effects were "mild," so there's ways they can get their marketing message into that article even if the author wants to change the draft. Everything is driven by marketing and promoting this new drug.

What was the most shocking of these marketing practices that you uncovered in the course of your research? Was there one that particularly stood out?

Oh, there are so many. But actually one day I was at this industry conference. There were a couple dozen pharmaceutical executives giving speeches, and I was looking down the agenda at the speeches that were going to be delivered at this conference, and there was one speech that just really jumped out at me. The speech was entitled "Creating a Disease," and at that point I didn't know a drug company would actually create a disease to sell more of a new drug, but I went to that speech and the executive went point by point with his PowerPoint presentation how he and his company had created a new disease. That was pretty shocking.

Now, you're talking about just creating a disease from thin air? Could you explain a little more about how they're creating this disease?

This was overactive bladder syndrome. The company, which was Pharmacia, had a new pill for incontinence, but the market for incontinence is very small. Doctors hesitate to prescribe drugs for incontinence, because it affects the elderly, and these drugs are very hard on people's minds. They can lead to falls and memory problems. And so many doctors will tell their patients, we can deal with this incontinence in non-pharmaceutical ways.

The drug company wanted to expand the market beyond people who were incontinent, to people who found themselves in the rest room, often had to run to the rest room. They hired some of the top urologists in the world, from all over the world, as consultants, paid to fly them to meetings. There were a couple of big meetings that the company paid for in London, and they got these urologists to agree that we could define a new disease called overactive bladder as something that affected someone who somebody who had to go to the rest room more than eight times a day. The doctors agreed with that. The company then hired some of those doctors to write articles. They actually paid to have these articles printed in the medical journal called *Urology*, and it's really as simple as that. You need a lot of money. That's what it takes to create a disease.

Let me ask from that then: How have the pharmaceutical companies' practices led to increased costs in our health system overall?

It definitely has. This marketing-driven way of doing healthcare has really contributed to the costs. I think this explains why our healthcare system is broken. The current system rewards doctors who might prescribe a drug that makes a patient sicker. If the patient becomes sicker, there's more office visits, there's more procedures. The way we pay for healthcare, this fee-for-service, it means that patients are getting too many drugs, too many tests, too many surgeries.

When you look at the studies, experts say that a third to as much as half of our healthcare dollars are wasted on procedures patients don't need. This explains a lot, this marketing, this aggressive marketing explains a lot of why our healthcare system is broken.

Now on the flip side, have new drugs led to any reductions in costs by substituting drugs for higher-cost services, surgeries, things like that?

Yes, some drugs have done incredible things. And that's one of the bottom line points of my book. It's not the medicines that are the problem. Medicines can definitely help patients, some in extraordinary ways. The problem is the marketing. Marketing is all about selling as much of a product to a customer as you can, whether the customer really needs that or not, which might be all right if you're selling something like laundry detergent. But it's definitely not all right when you're selling prescription drugs.

You cite the statistic that over 100,000 Americans die every year from prescription drugs taken just as the doctor recommended." That seems an extraordinary number, and I'm wondering why people aren't up in arms about this? Why don't more people know that this is such a large cause of death?

Well, a lot of these deaths actually aren't reported. When a death certificate is filled out, it's filled out usually by the doctor who has prescribed these drugs. There are almost no autopsies done today. Right after World War II, about 50 percent of deaths were autopsied, so we figured out why people died. Today, only eight percent of deaths are autopsied. Doctors are just guessing when they fill out these death certificates. That's part of the reason people don't understand that so many Americans are dying from drugs.

A lot of these deaths actually look like—for example, when you looked at Vioxx, the pain reliever, it was a drug that we found after 20 million Americans took it, that it doubled the risk of heart attack and stroke. People who died from Vioxx had heart attacks or strokes. Those are common conditions, common problems for patients, so the drug can cause something that looks like a common way for people to die, and it's not recorded. The families of the patients don't know what actually happened. That's one of the reasons people don't realize so many people are dying from prescription drugs.

So you get that 100,000 number based on what data?

That comes from a study that the FDA often cites, that found that—the study estimated that more than 100,000 Americans die every year from drugs they took just as directed. This isn't where the doctor made a mistake or the pharmacist made a mistake and prescribed the wrong drug. This isn't where the patient made a mistake and took too much. All those things happen, too. This is just where supposedly everything went right. This is just expected side effects that you would find on the label for a prescription drug.

Obviously those deaths are one of the main ways that this hyped marketing of drugs has affected our society. What are some of the other impacts it has had?

It's actually hurting everyone, even if you are fortunate enough not to need prescription drugs. Everyone is suffering the consequences of this aggressive marketing, and for example, the highways have become less safe as more drivers become drowsy and disoriented and otherwise impaired by their prescriptions. There was just this year actually pilots and truckers were banned from taking a drug called Chantix, which is a drug to help people stop smoking, because there were reports that drivers were blacking out from this drug or having seizures, and it was causing automobile accidents.

Also the abuse of prescription drugs has skyrocketed in the U.S., especially among children. A little more than 10 years ago, let's see, I'm sorry I don't have that figure right in front of me, but when you look at the accidental overdoses of prescription drugs, the numbers have gone from 11,000 in 1999 to almost double five years later, so they went from 11,000 to 20,000 in just about five years. Those are the deaths where people accidentally took too much.

You mentioned that children are being affected. One of the most frightening parts of the book as I read it was the extent to which drug companies are targeting children, not just to sell more product immediately, but to create this lifetime enthusiasm for medication use. I'm wondering if you have thoughts on how can consumers can help break this cycle of starting to take prescription medications at a very young age, and having that become a part of one's life.

I think that one thing that would help a lot is if we got rid of the television ads. A little more than 10 years ago it was illegal for the drug companies to advertise on television, but in 1997, the FDA weakened the rule to allow them to advertise on television, and so our kids today have grown up with these television ads. It makes these drugs look very safe and that everyone's taking them and that your life will be glorious if you take prescription drugs. I think that's one of the reasons we're finding that more children are abusing prescription drugs. They know heroin and cocaine are dangerous, but prescription drugs that come from a doctor, they see them advertised on television, and it's given them this impression that they can have fun with these drugs without worrying about whether they're safe or not.

Massachusetts recently passed a law banning gifts from the pharmaceutical companies to physicians. Will measures like these help, and if so, who needs to take the lead in driving for them?

I don't think that Massachusetts banned all gifts. When I read it—for instance, I believe that physicians can still work as consultants for the drug industry. I might be wrong but I when read the Massachusetts law, I thought this is a good step in the right direction, but it doesn't go far enough. But that is one of the things that needs to be done.

We actually need a federal law that would stop all doctors from taking gifts or cash from the drug industry. That would help so much. That would really solve a lot of these problems. In 1951, Congress decided that we were going to have to get a prescription from a doctor. Before, you could go into the pharmacy and get whatever drug you wanted. But Congress wanted the physician, who was independent from the pharmacy and from the drug company to be that gatekeeper, but now, with all this money flowing from the drug industry to the doctors, the doctor just is not that independent gatekeeper. If we could get a federal law to make the doctor that gatekeeper again, it would change this.

Why hasn't the FDA done more to stop this up till now?

One of the problems is that in 1992, Congress passed a law that allowed the drug industry to start paying the FDA. Before 1992, the FDA had one customer, which was us, the public. But after that law, the drug industry also became the FDA's customers. There have been surveys of scientists inside the FDA, and they talk about this pressure they feel to please the drug industry. That's one of the problems here, that our FDA is not as aggressive as they should be.

Do we need to change its organization or its scope or is it necessary to create some additional body to create these changes?

I think we should rethink whether it's all right for the drug industry to pay so much money to the FDA. I think that law was a mistake. I think we should use more taxpayer money to boost up the FDA's resources instead of allowing the industry to pay fees. I think that would definitely be a good step to take.

Have there been any recent moves in the right direction, either on a state or a federal level?

Some members of Congress are very interested in this. There's a bill in the Senate Finance Committee that would require the drug industry to report all their payments to physicians, or at least payments over a certain dollar level. I think that's a step in the right direction. I think that better would be for a ban on these payments, but at least this would allow patients to try to find how much money their physician is taking from the drug industry, and then they can decide if they're comfortable with that or not. That's one thing that is in Washington and people are talking about.

I'm wondering if any of the broader healthcare reforms, like the requirement for everyone to have insurance in Massachusetts, do they help alleviate the problem, putting less pressure on physicians, for example?

No, I don't think it alleviates this problem at all. These companies continue to aggressively market. The system is still a fee-for-service system, a fee for each procedure. What it does, it helps people who don't have healthcare to get into the system, but they're getting into this very bad, dangerous system, so it definitely doesn't solve this problem.

What more would you like to see then from the new administration and the new Congress as we move forward?

Well, again I think a law that stopped doctors from taking money from the drug industry would go a long way. The other thing is ... The drug industry has actually learned to use science as a marketing tool. Our scientific studies are being distorted. They make it appear as if these new drugs are more effective and more safe than they actually are. The few independent scientists that are out there that aren't working for the drug industry, they're very concerned about this. Some of them say our published medical literature is little more than propaganda. We need to get our science honest again, we need to take the marketing out of there.

There's some talk in Washington about a new agency, a scientific agency that would go through all the published science and try to figure out what drugs are best for patients. That would be a wonderful, another great thing to do. One of the problems is that when I see what they're talking about in Washington, they want the drug industry to have a voice inside that agency, which I think would be a terrible mistake. The agency has to be completely independent from the drug industry, otherwise, it will have the same problems again.

A final question, moving back to the consumer level, how would you advise patients to approach their doctors when they are curious about a new drug or when their doctor prescribes something for them? Are there questions they should be asking?

They should keep asking questions until they are comfortable that this is the right drug for them. You might even want to start with asking your doctor whether he or she is taking money from the drug industry in the form of consulting payments. Tens of thousands of doctors in this country actually give paid speeches for the industry. Ask them if they're taking money from the drug industry.

I think if patients bring these things up to their physicians, more physicians are going to say "I don't want anything to do with this. I can see my patients are upset with it, and I'm going to do what's right and stay independent from the drug industry." When your doctor is prescribing a drug, you need to make sure you understand all the potential side effects of the drug, so if you start to experience one of these side effects, you'll know, well, I started taking this drug, it looks like this isn't some new health problem, it's simply a side effect of this drug. Call your doctor and there

might be a different drug you can take that doesn't have the side effect. It's just you need to be so careful in today's healthcare system because it's really up to you to keep yourself safe.