

Under the Influence: Corruption at the Height of the Opioid Epidemic

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Humans have grappled with the ever-present and invisible specter of pain throughout their existence. Chronic injuries have affected humanity since the start of their evolution, acting as a constant reminder of the human experience and the inevitability of hardship. As long as humans have dealt with their aches and pains, so have they strived to combat their ailments. However, in their innocent search for cures and better well-being, humanity uncovered flawed and dangerous forms of recovery. Opioids have long been a drug used to feel no pain; its “earliest known reference [for the] cultivation of [opium poppies emerged as early as] 3000 BCE [in Mesopotamia].”¹ While opioids, in theory, were only a means of pain relief, what had initially sounded like a miracle drug quickly became a plague with the emergence of Oxycontin and its use to treat chronic injuries during the late 1900s to early 2000s.² Surely, before the epidemic, pharmaceutical companies had tested the drug and realized its fault, right? In reality, companies and executives like Purdue Pharma and Richard Sackler tested their products and were made fully aware of the dangerous effects of their pain relievers, but they went to market anyway.

In most cases, individuals who had suffered an injury, trauma, or plight and had only sought to get better were unknowingly prescribed the highly addictive and deadly drug. Those banking on a pain-free future instead found themselves dependent on the drug. While Oxycontin did combat pain, its effects eventually vanished, leaving the user to consume yet another pill.³ As a result, drug addiction ran rampant through populations of Oxycontin users, and with it, death

¹ Bryson, Ethan O., and Christine E. Boxhorn. *The Opioid Epidemic Origins, Current State and Potential Solutions*. N.p.: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

² Chakradhar, Shraddha. "The History of OxyContin, Told through Unsealed Purdue Documents." STAT. Last modified December 3, 2019. <https://www.statnews.com/2019/12/03/oxycontin-history-told-through-purdue-pharma-documents/>.

³ Bryson, Ethan O. "Opioid Epidemic Origins"

and despair.⁴ Poor and middle-class communities were particularly left ravaged, with many blue-collar workers relying on the drug as treatment.⁵ The Opioid epidemic, which scourged communities throughout America for much of the late 1900s, acted as a testament to the detrimental consequences of Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family's insatiable greed, presenting a narrative of corporate malfeasance that disproportionately affected minorities (mainly African Americans) and perpetuated systemic injustices even to this day.

While nowadays, opioids have become synonymous with addiction and danger, they once acted as an efficient and ancient remedy that worked wonders in moderation. The story of the modern-day opioid began some 2100 years ago in the civilization of Sumeria, where the opium poppy was initially cultivated.⁶ Sumerians used the plant for its milky-liquid extract, which could be utilized as a method of helping treat ailments. Soon after they realized the plant's medical qualities, Sumerians affectionately dubbed the opium poppy "Hul Gil" or "the joy plant."⁷ Over time, the opium flower became a valuable resource, and the Sumerians passed information about the plant and its properties to the Assyrians, who eventually informed the Egyptians.⁸ After the plant arrived in Egypt, the opium plant became well-known and desirable throughout the world.⁹ As a result, it became a valuable commodity that was bought and sold along the silk trade routes and spread throughout the world.¹⁰ It is reminiscent of Pandora's box (intricately decorated and

⁴ Bryson, Ethan O. "Opioid Epidemic Origins"

⁵ Asfaw, Abay. "Injuries That Happen at Work Lead to More Opioid Prescriptions and Higher Opioid Costs." National Library of Medicine. Last modified September 2022. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10066591/>.

⁶ Norn, Svend, Poul Kruse, and Edith Kruse. "History of Opium Poppy and Morphine." *National Library of Medicine*, 2005. Accessed April 8, 2024. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17152761/>.

⁷ DEA Museum Authors. "Opium Poppy." Drug Enforcement Administration Museum. Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://museum.dea.gov/exhibits/online-exhibits/cannabis-coca-and-poppy-natures-addictive-plants/opium-poppy#:~:text=The%20earliest%20reference%20to%20opium,it%20on%20to%20the%20Egyptians.>

⁸ DEA Museum Authors. "Opium Poppy"

⁹ DEA Museum Authors. "Opium Poppy"

¹⁰ DEA Museum Authors. "Opium Poppy"

ornate, but inside a terror waiting to escape) that a beautiful flower and the cultivation of its byproduct effectively caused the deaths of over 560,000 people.¹¹

Opium entered American markets sometime during the 1800s after the hypodermic needle's inception, an easy and effective method to administer morphine, which was created by Alexander Wood in Scotland.¹² During the 1800s, cunning salesmen pitched compelling ideas to consumers, claiming opioids "produce sleep and composure, relieve pain and irritation, nervous excitement and morbid irritability of body and mind, [and] allay convulsive and spasmodic actions."¹³ In contrast to the late 1990s, when opioids were marketed as miracle drugs with no downside, the adverse effects of the drug were comparatively well-known and advertised, with much of the population generally knowing the risks associated with the drug.¹⁴ As a result, opioid deaths remained low, though addiction was prevalent, even as users were made increasingly aware before the use of opioids of their viscous side effects. The American opioid market, however, only truly began to boom during the Civil War, when thousands of injured soldiers relied on the drug to treat their wounds. From then on, opioids would have a significant impact on the United States, and the drug would be a household name.

In the early 20th century, the United States government took action to mitigate the increasing wave of addiction brought on by the opioid crisis of the 19th century. In 1895-1951, the government finally opted to invoke regulations on the drug, laws that scrutinized the amounts

¹¹ Federal Communications Commission Writers. "Focus on Broadband and Opioids." Connect2Health. Accessed April 11, 2024. <https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/maps/connect2health/focus-on-opioids.html#:~:text=More%20than%20560%2C000%20people%20in,82%25%20involved%20synthetic%20opioids%3B%20and>.

¹² Leidos Editorial Team. "A Timeline of the Opioid Epidemic." Leidos. Last modified September 2019. <https://www.leidos.com/insights/timeline-opioid-epidemic>.

¹³ Bell, Danna. "Opium Use in the 19th Century." Library of Congress Blogs. Last modified October 20, 2022. Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2022/10/opium-use-in-the-19th-century/>.

¹⁴ Bell, Danna. "Opium Use"

that could be prescribed and who had access to them, though loose in modern standards and based on racial prejudice, which helped to reduce the wave.¹⁵ This crackdown on opioids and particularly the medical distribution of them saw some 25,000 doctors prosecuted for “illegal prescription of drugs.”¹⁶ While it seemed as if the United States government's early intervention had dealt with the opioid crisis for good, little did the country know that decades later, America would face its largest drug crisis and see hundreds of thousands of people die, families be torn apart, and others emotionally harmed. No one could have imagined that one greedy family and their pharmaceutical company would result in national anguish.

Initially, the purpose of the drug was to act as a method of relief for cancer patients dealing with immense pain; however, its strength eventually would be utilized for all forms of chronic injuries. Prior to the commercialization of the drug Oxycontin, it was referred to more generally as Oxycodone (generic). Oxycodone was a pain-soothing agent for cancer patients as they neared passing, never meant for general consumption.¹⁷ It was only after the ideas of the corrupt business minds of the Sackler family that the drug became more apparent in medical practices. When the Sackler family began to advertise Oxycontin outside of cancer-related markets, sales multiplied tenfold from roughly “670 000 in 1997 to about 6.2 million in 2002.”¹⁸

The Sackler Families' aggressive marketing tactics and relentless promotion of Oxycontin, an extremely addictive and dangerous opioid, not only accelerated but also

¹⁵ Justice Reform Resources. "America's War on Drugs - 50 Years Later." The Leadership Conference on Human and Civil Rights. Last modified June 29, 2021. Accessed April 7, 2024. <https://civilrights.org/blog/americas-war-on-drugs-50-years-later/#:~:text=For%20instance%2C%20the%20Smoking%20Opium,of%20cocaine%20and%20various%20opiates.>

¹⁶ Justice Reform Resources

¹⁷Wang, Yinxia. "Role of Oxycodone Hydrochloride in Treating Radiotherapy-Related Pain." National Library of Medicine. Last modified 2020. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7024089/#:~:text=Generally%2C%20due%20to%20overlooked%20cancer,cancer%20pain%20that%20patients%20suffer.>

¹⁸ Van Zee, Art. "The Promotion and Marketing of OxyContin: Commercial Triumph, Public Health Tragedy." National Library of Medicine. Last modified February 2009. Accessed April 24, 2024. [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2622774/.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2622774/)

exacerbated the devastating opioid issue in America, perpetuating widespread addiction and suffering. The Sackler family exploited the shortcomings of the FDA, which, prior to the modern age, lacked a firm grasp over food and drug markets. Purdue Pharma, via shady dealings and loopholes of the FDA's regulations, was able to capitalize and sugarcoat the effects of Oxycontin.¹⁹ As a result, consumers were kept in the dark about the drug's addictive and dangerous nature, believing it to be a miracle drug with only one upside. Many users grew reliant on the drug to ease pain while others used it for the euphoric high sensation it provided when ingested nasally; regardless, the drug's inception resulted in the "worst drug overdose epidemic in the US," and one that would leave a detrimental lasting impact.²⁰ In addition, Purdue Pharma's aggressive marketing campaign included heavy incentivization for doctors to prescribe the drug, offering monetary bonuses and gifts as rewards.²¹ At the company's peak, it is believed that Purdue Pharma paid some 40 million dollars in incentive bonuses to medical professionals in the year 2001.²² The company also offered all-expenses-paid pain-management conferences for doctors, typically held in semi-tropical locations, to further persuade medical professionals about the drug's effectiveness.²³ Moreover, through various grandiose marketing tactics, Purdue Pharma cemented OxyContin as the nation's premier method of pain management. Through holding a firm grasp on the medical industry, OxyContin's sales rocketed, and with it, rates of addiction and drug-related mortality.

¹⁹ Kolodny, Andrew. "How FDA Failures Contributed to the Opioid Crisis." *AMA Journal of Ethics*. Last modified August 2020. Accessed April 25, 2024.

<https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/how-fda-failures-contributed-opioid-crisis/2020-08>.

²⁰ Kolodny, Andrew. *FDA Failures*

²¹ Van Zee, Art. "Marketing of OxyContin."

²² Van Zee, Art. "Marketing of OxyContin."

²³ Van Zee, Art. "Marketing of OxyContin."

While the opioid epidemic, onset by Purdue Pharma, was realized throughout the country, much of the affliction was shouldered by the middle-lower class. Pharmaceutical giants preyed on the working class, a large group of individuals dependent on work as a means to sustain their families, but also a group prone to workplace injury. “Occupational injuries can lead to chronic painful conditions, disability, unemployment [frequently] resulting [in the] use of opioid analgesics.”²⁴ Consequently, the working class becomes more reliant on painkillers and more susceptible to addiction. Those lacking a college education, typically low income, also “accounted for 35.4% of deaths... [and] 24.6% of opioid overdose deaths” occurred in households under the poverty line.²⁵ The wealthy and upper middle class seldom saw themselves in the heat of the epidemic, their wealth, knowledge, and access to treatment unrivaled by the working-lower classes.

However, as time passed, the Sacklers and Purdue Pharma found themselves scrutinized after a government-led investigation began to uncover the company’s shady practices, under-the-table deals, and misadvertising. Eventually, a whistleblower and former sales rep, Steven May, emerged, alleging fraud within the company, an act that would catalyze the beginning of the end for Purdue Pharma.²⁶ Steven May exposed the company’s shortcomings and blamed the greed of those in charge. However, the Sacklers themselves escaped real punishment, avoiding jail time, instead being forced liable for an estimate six billion dollar payout to those

²⁴ Altekruze, Sean F. "Socioeconomic Risk Factors for Fatal Opioid Overdoses in the United States: Findings from the Mortality Disparities in American Communities Study (MDAC)." National Library of Medicine. Last modified January 17, 2020. Accessed May 12, 2024. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6968850/>.

²⁵ Altekruze, Sean F. Socioeconomic Risk Factors

²⁶ How OxyContin Was Sold to the Masses. Hosted by Steven Valentino. Aired October 27, 2017, on The New Yorker Radio Hour.

affected by OxyContin.²⁷ In spite of the crackdown on pharmaceutical Malfeasance, The Sacklers found themselves virtually unscathed, never being arrested, maintaining their wealth, and fleeing the United States.²⁸ After damaging its public perception, Purdue Pharma filed for bankruptcy in 2019, and subsequently, the company was dissolved.²⁹

While the company itself ceased to exist, Purdue Pharma left behind a legacy of addiction, anguish, and injustice, all of which are still felt to this day. While many believe the Opioid Epidemic has long passed a decade ago, drug-related deaths have only soared to new heights with every passing year.³⁰ Sadly, 75% of the ~107,000 overdose deaths in 2021 involved opioids, illuminating the lasting impact of the drug.³¹ In addition, lower-income communities and minorities continue to be disproportionately ravaged by waves of opioid addiction, lacking sufficient knowledge of the drug, its effects, and the ample advice of medical professionals. For instance, “there was a nearly five-fold greater rate of opioid deaths in Black vs. White populations in 2020, demonstrating the severity of the disparity .”³² Sadly enough, “it seems there

²⁷ Ovalle, David. "Supreme Court Pauses Purdue Pharma Settlement Plan worth Billions." The Washington Post. Last modified August 10, 2023. Accessed May 8, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2023/08/10/opioids-purdue-pharma-sackler-family-supreme-court/>.

²⁸ Ovalle, David. "Supreme Court"

²⁹ Vansickle, Abbie. "Supreme Court Appears Split over Opioid Settlement for Purdue Pharma." The New York Times. Last modified December 4, 2023. Accessed May 12, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/04/us/politics/supreme-court-purdue-pharma.html#:~:text=Purdue%20filed%20for%20bankruptcy%20protection,to%20counter%20the%20opioid%20epidemic.>

³⁰ The CDC Writers. "Understanding the Opioid Epidemic." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Last modified August 8, 2023. Accessed May 19, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.

³¹ The CDC Writers. "Understanding Opioid Epidemic"

³² Gondre-Lewis, Marjorie C. "The Opioid Epidemic: A Crisis Disproportionately Impacting Black Americans and Urban Communities." National Library of Medicine. Last modified September 6, 2022. Accessed May 1, 2024. [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9447354/#:~:text=There%20was%20a%20nearly%20five,White%20populations%20in%202020%20\(Fig.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9447354/#:~:text=There%20was%20a%20nearly%20five,White%20populations%20in%202020%20(Fig.)

are widening racial disparities in opioid mortality” that are exacerbated by inadequate access to medical care and a lack of informed knowledge.³³

As the opioid crisis continues its unflinching campaign nationwide, the imperative for a united front becomes a beacon of hope in the presence of addiction’s onslaught. While, over the years, improvements have been made in the regulation of medically prescribed opioids, the United States faces a new challenge in synthetic, street-made opioids.³⁴ Though Purdue Pharma’s reign has long since ended, the evolution of the drug industry continues to ravage communities and frighten many others. In a time of desperation, it is necessary to spread awareness and create a distinctly negative public perception of the drug. In tandem, it is essential to reduce the stigma around substance abuse and addiction and realize it to be an uncontrollable condition. By fostering a greater sense of collaboration, education, and compassion, not only can we look to minimize the damages of opioids but also forge a future where the shadow of opioid addiction becomes eclipsed by the incandescent glow of recovery.

³³ Britz, Jacqueline B. "Rising Racial Disparities in Opioid Mortality and Undertreatment of Opioid Use Disorder and Mental Health Comorbidities in Virginia." National Library of Medicine. Last modified September 2023. Accessed May 1, 2024. [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10546578/#:~:text=\(Figure%20\).-,In%202020%2C%20Black%20males%20were%201.5%20times%20more%20likely%20to,higher%20\(p%3C0.001\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10546578/#:~:text=(Figure%20).-,In%202020%2C%20Black%20males%20were%201.5%20times%20more%20likely%20to,higher%20(p%3C0.001))

³⁴ The CDC Writers. “Understanding Opioid Epidemic”

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