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In Our Opinion: Eli Lilly's bitter medicine

A Northampton resident's experience with drug giant Eli Lilly illustrates why so many Americans suspect the pharmaceutical industry is not looking out for the best interests of consumers. Will Hall, who co-founded a local mental health advocacy group known as the Freedom Center, has been the target of Lilly's legal efforts to squelch information about potential side effects from its best-selling medication, Zyprexa.

The medicine, used to treat schizophrenia, has been taken by 20 million people worldwide; it generates \$4.5 billion a year for Lilly. The drug has been on the market since 1996 and, over the years, doctors have voiced suspicions that it may cause diabetes in some patients by encouraging weight gain and high blood sugar.

While Lilly has consistently tried to play down any risks associated with Zyprexa, it agreed in 2005 to pay \$700 million to settle 8,000 claims filed by people who said they developed diabetes after taking the medication.

A lawyer involved in that litigation obtained Lilly's internal documents on Zyprexa and distributed them to a number of mental health advocates, including Hall.

Lilly has fought in court to have a gag order placed on Hall and 12 other activists to prevent them from speaking publicly about the documents. A judge granted the first request, and then agreed to renew the gag order.

Information from the Lilly documents has been released nonetheless through a number of media outlets. The documents demonstrate that Lilly was aware that Zyprexa could cause diabetes, but withheld the information from the public because it could hurt sales of the medication.

One document shows that Lilly had been advised that 30 percent of the people who take the medication gained at least 22 pounds after the first year; some gained as much as 100 pounds. Six years ago, a panel of diabetes doctors warned Lilly that "unless we come clean on this, it could get much more serious than we might anticipate."

Yet, Lilly continues to insist the documents were taken out of context and don't paint an accurate picture of Zyprexa. Last month, the company issued a statement saying "there is no scientific evidence establishing that Zyprexa causes diabetes."

All of this is reminiscent of a similar controversy a few years ago involving another drug maker, Merck, and its painkilling medication Vioxx. In response to lawsuits filed by people who said they developed heart disease after taking Vioxx, Merck released documents showing the company had been aware of a link to cardiovascular disease but played down the risks to protect its profits; Vioxx has since been pulled from the market.

Pharmaceutical companies spend billions of dollars a year on television commercials to advertise their newest drugs, yet they can't level with the public about possible side effects.

They also spread millions of dollars more in campaign contributions among politicians in an effort to obtain favorable legislation. Meanwhile, drug prices continue to soar, placing an enormous burden on the nation's health system and making some medications unaffordable for many Americans, especially senior citizens.

It's understandable if the pharmaceutical industry is wary of litigation; The industry does make a great investment, and take financial risks, to develop new medications and is sometimes the target of frivolous lawsuits.

When the pharmaceutical industry seeks gag orders against people like Will Hall, though, it only reinforces the suspicion that it has something to hide. Hall and others like him are simply doing what drug makers have failed to do: tell the truth about the possible side effects of medications.

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