

The Bizarre World of Healthcare (7)

Pills for Preteens

Feeding overweight children with cholesterol-fighting pills is more reasonable than fussing about their health before they get fat, believe US medics.

It's the drugmaker who defines a malady, not the patient. Or, in other words, if the healthy don't want to buy your drugs, just make them ill. At the beginning of the 21st century, this approach is rampant in the bizarre world of healthcare. Still healthy? No gout, no pain, no impairment?

Well, just wait right there. Soon we'll get you with our pills, too.

The pharmaceutical industry, always searching for new and more lucrative blockbusters, is suffering from poor sales. But according to IMS Health, a market research company, the world's drugmakers have reached annual sales of prescription medicines of nearly €500 billion. In other words, in industrialized nations every adult spends on average €40 per month on pills, salves and tinctures.

Just half a trillion every year? €40 per month? Phew, that's peanuts. Related industries are more successful.

Take the arms industry. Worldwide expenditure on weapons reached sales of €885 billion in 2005, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). That means that guns and land mines sell almost twice as well as pills.

Take another welfare sector, the nuclear power industry. In the light of rising oil prices, the disciples of uranium-based energy generation have returned, awaiting pretty profits. The International Energy Agency recently announced that, worldwide, 32 additional nuclear power plants must be built every year until 2050. That makes a total of 1,344 new plants and sales of an estimated €3,4 trillion (excluding any charges for operation, demolition and worst case scenarios).

In the light of such success stories, the pharmaceutical industry should try harder if it wants to stay in competition. The more guns and nuclear power plants are sold, the less money there will be for pills and tinctures. But two crucial problems have to be solved first. Firstly, there is no new blockbuster on the horizon. And secondly, even if there, who could buy it?

Big Pharma mustn't be afraid. The solution is simple. First of all, take the world's best selling drug of the last 10 years and then find a huge new target group. That's all.

The best selling drug of the last ten years is Pfizer's cholesterol reducer, Lipitor, yielding incredible revenues of €10 billion in 2006. Annual sales of all available cholesterol-lowering statin drugs, were around €18 billion in the same year.

So is there an overlooked consumer group for Lipitor? Yes, there is. It is located in kindergartens and primary schools. Children.



Well, why not give statins to preteens? Tons of methylphenidate ("Ritalin") are administered every year to children that just *might* have ADHS. In fact, many of these supposedly hyperactive children are "medicated" by their overtaxed parents without even consulting a doctor. Ritalin sales have risen 14-fold over ten years. Many thousands of children swallow their daily sedative psychoactive pills, even though methylphenidate is potentially addictive, the effects of long-term treatment on developing brains are not clear, and lots of side effects, such as hallucinations and high blood pressure can occur.

Medicating the young with cholesterol lowering drugs provides similar opportunities for Big Pharma. Those who want to give statins to children recently got a boost. In July, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended "*more aggressive use of cholesterol-lowering drugs starting as early as the age of 8*". That might be "*their best hope of lowering the risk of heart attack*," the doctors added.

Nice wording! "*Their best hope*." Well, let's just give all these overweight kids statins. That will be more convenient for their parents than to teach them a reasonable lifestyle. Regular exercise? Healthy food? Nice of you to ask, but that's unnecessary. After his fatty meal of chips, chocolate and sugary coke, my sweet little fat bloke will guzzle his daily ration of Lipitor (by the way, I don't care a jot about the lack of evidence that the use of statins will prevent heart attacks later in life, nor about potential side effects such as muscle pain and cognitive problems. It's anything for an easy life around here.)

See you on the living room sofa, playing computer games all day long!

By the way, did you know that the AAP report's lead author has worked as a consultant to several companies that sell cholesterol reducing drugs?

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"Well, let's just give all these overweight kids statins. That will be comfortable for their parents."