

## Trust: Need for an Improved Communication between the Public World and the Pharmaceutical Companies

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### Abstract

In the industrialized world, the negative image that many people (including politicians) have of pharmaceutical companies not only makes the life for those working in this field more difficult, in a sense it is a road block. Without an improvement in communication between the public world and the pharmaceutical industry, one can foresee this industry steadily becoming a more difficult environment to work in. There is a clear need for knowing more about all the work done inside these companies before a new drug is approved (it is not all about marketing...). That society has no understanding of the ever-increasing costs of new drugs is also related to this lack of understanding of how tricky and cumbersome the process is to take a new idea for treating a certain disease to production of a marketed drug. With a relatively small investment of money, but with an investment of much good will, brain power, and trust, it should be possible to bring all relevant parties together and make a change.

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The desire to have perfect diagnostic and therapeutic measures that help all of us live a life free of pain and any impairment is greater than ever. With all the progress medicine (and pharmacy) has made in the last 100 years, we have simply forgotten that the majority of people in the early decade of the last century died as a consequence of infectious diseases. It is an advantage for us to have drugs that help against all such "killers." We know that we pay a great deal of money for these products each year and we recognize that the respective companies earn a lot of money with our wish to be healthy and active.

This feeling turns into negative emotions each time the mass media report with a special touch about the next "Pharma scandal." The overall effect of such reports over the past years is that there is a certain amount of distrust and negative perceptions regarding the pharmaceutical industry and the people behind it. Also, in my private world, people react much more differently if I tell them I do diabetes research or work in a company that is active in developing new drugs for diabetes treatment. Just by describing my daily work a bit differently I can give a talk in a very different direction. It is interesting to see how aggressively many people react when it comes to the

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pharmaceutical industry in view of a massive shortage of knowledge about what is going on inside this world.

At the same time, the mass media have great enthusiasm when reporting about “breakthroughs” in science. However, what we are missing is a 5- or 10-year wait before making these announcements, which would allow ample time to make critical evaluations of the product. It has been shown from hundreds of publications in highly ranked journals in which such a “breakthrough” in basic research (the actual wording in the publications might have been a bit different, but the impetus was there) that only a very small number of products make it into clinical practice. In other words, there is a world between science and clinical practice that evaluates if such innovations are really clinically efficient and safe. In the vast majority of cases, it has to be clearly stated that they are not! Such a work, which gives a “negative” judgement to all the “positive” research work, is not well appreciated by the outside world. Because companies fear a loss of confidential information when they talk about their work in public, the work done inside pharmaceutical companies is well guarded. Try to get information about the current work done in such companies from their home page. You will start laughing when you see how outdated such home pages are in many cases and how little the information provided. These companies might be more open toward the world of financial analysts as these have a massive impact on the stock prices (at least until very recently). In summary, the government (that means all of us) finances a lot of basic research, which hopefully comes along with new ideas for the drug treatment of diseases. To be honest, the pharmaceutical companies also finance such activities or are at least supportive in many cases. Once such a potential compound is discovered, high walls are established around it for the next years. In the unlikely situation that such a compound makes it way through the clinical development process (only 1 of 10 compounds makes it!) and gets market approval by the regulatory authorities after several years, suddenly the situation changes. The new drug is presented in extensive marketing campaigns as if it can cure everything and should be added to the drinking water. Clearly the new compound is more expensive than the current drugs that have been available for the same disease for a number of years and we have no long-term knowledge about its safety and so on. However, the company says that its usage saves money because it is more efficient, has an improved profile of side effects, and so on. At the same time, practically no information is given about all the work done in the companies during

the clinical development process and how many people have put all their knowledge and expertise into this new drug.

I strongly believe that a more transparent development process (while keeping secrets secret) would reduce the negative view of the public regarding the pharmaceutical industry. This does not mean inviting a TV crew to a company and showing them high-tech production lines that look impressive even as nobody understands what happens there. It means that more information should be provided about the steps of the development process and what happens in each phase. I agree that this sounds very trivial or too complex depending on the point of view; however, in view of the brain power and money invested in this industry, I find it difficult to understand why a very small portion of these funds cannot be invested into a creative process that helps initiate an improved communication between the public world and the pharmaceutical industry.

There are several issues with this approach.

1. Bribery: Once you are invited by a company, there is immediate suspicion that they are trying to brainwash you by providing a certain amount of money. Even if money were not involved, just paying for travel, food, and accommodations can be regarded as bribery. Most probably we would need somebody who can act as a respected communicator, paid by the government, to ensure transparency and give a full account about all financial aspects.
2. (Anti-)trust: Ideally, such a communication would not be established with only one company, but with a number or all of them. However, a meeting in which employees of different companies participate directly initiates the suspicion of “trust” activities of such companies. A respected lawyer would have to be present at all times.
3. Interest in the companies: People in the different departments inside the pharmaceutical companies may have very different views on such an initiative. My personal experience is that people in research and development (most of them physicians and scientists) would be highly positive, that management would see both positive and negative aspects in it, and that marketing people would regard this as a waste of money as this would not sell a single tablet (probably my view on marketing is a bit too negative). From my point of view, it is especially the very aggressive

marketing of drugs in TV spots, in magazines, and so on that has strengthened the negative image that many people have about the pharmaceutical industry. The problem for this industry is, if a single company would not join a codex that limits such marketing activities in order to make a better business, all the other companies willing to accept such a restriction are in trouble. Again it is the word "trust" that is key in being able to make such an undertaking successful.

If people were interested in improved communication (and more trust) between the public and the pharmaceutical industry would be willing to invest some time, energy, and money (what about asking for one-thousandth of the marketing costs of the pharmaceutical industry?) in such an initiative, this could be very rewarding. One can also phrase this differently, if the pharmaceutical industry is not doing a better job in this respect, then they should not be surprised regarding any "inappropriate" action that is being undertaken by the government (which is elected by the public and is aiming to represent this in case there is "risk" for the health of the public). Clearly the pharmaceutical industry has, for obvious reasons, strict limitations about what they can say when it comes to the indications of a drug, how good it is, and so on; however, these companies should not be limited (and should not self-limit themselves!) by the regulatory agencies when they explain to the public what they are doing and why they are doing it. So it might be a very smart move (and an extremely good investment!) if people in the pharmaceutical industry (and those who are interested in cooperating with them in a mutual good way) start a respective action sooner than later.