

Are biomedical drugs so widely used around the world because they are the most effective?

This essay question suggests a causal relationship between the widespread usage of biomedicine and its efficaciousness; therefore, two potential topics of debate are worth discussing: Are biomedical drugs the most widely used form of healing? Why do people use biomedical drugs around the globe? In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on these matters by drawing upon anthropological literature on biomedicine, economics and public health.

Pharmaceuticals and power

The first query of this paper can be answered straightforwardly. Biomedical drugs seem to be the most used form of healing around the globe. In suggesting a causal relationship between massive usage and effectiveness I propose an analysis about the relationship between pharmaceuticals and: biomedicine; marketing and daily realities.

Pharmaceuticals and biomedicine

Globalization has located biomedicine in a privileged position being exported to almost everywhere around the planet. In fact, this is a result of a process of modernization that began in the 18th century. This process, which consisted in the systematization and professionalization of the biomedicine, sought the “bureaucratization and rationalization of everyday life” (Lock and Nguyen 2010:68).

The power of biomedicine is related to the strong relationship with the governments. Biomedicine is the official provider of national health services and the governments seek to safeguard the political order wherein professional practice is sustained. This political power places the discipline in a favorable position of visibility towards the general public (West 2006). In this sense, the encounters between biomedicine and alternative healing systems are worth discussing. Borders have been produced and reproduced between systems of thought in order to preserve biomedical authority. And where alternative healing systems have been assimilated into clinical contexts, they are usually transformed into a “scientifically intelligible traditional medicine”, instead of being valued for themselves (Langwick 2006).

“The status of rejected knowledge relies more on questions of power than on standards of truth and effectiveness” (Laguerre 1987:11).

Biomedicine preserves such authority with the collaboration of pharmaceuticals companies which through biomedical drugs have the ‘valuable role’ to channel this power to the bodies and to the lives of the population. As Van der Geest (1996) points out pharmaceutical’s main purpose lies in their effect on the well-being of the person who took them.

Unfortunately, it is known that, sometimes, to keep a certain level of authority, hierarchy, in short, power, people could act mindless of ethical behavior. The tragedy lies not with the medicines but with the marketing campaigns and the striking power that these pharmaceutical companies now have over the practice of medicine.

Pharmaceuticals and Marketing

“We’ve come to a time when decisions on how to treat a disease have as great a chance of being hatched in a corporate marketing department as by a group of independent doctors working to improve the public’s health” (Petersen, 2008:11).

As Petersen (2008) points out, at one time, the most successful pharmaceutical companies were those with the brightest scientists searching for cures. However, currently the drug companies have become marketing machines to grow profits and power. They are selling medications (such as anti-depressant pills, heart medications and so forth) with the same methods that Coca-Cola uses to sell its products. It seems that now selling prescription drugs has become the pharmaceutical industry’s obsession.

According to business analysis, the pharmaceutical industry is the most profitable sector of commerce (Angell 2000: 1902). In 2000, the global market for prescription drugs was \$320 billion, and this figure is rising by about 10 per cent per year (Henry and Lexchin 2002).

Pharmaceutical companies are focusing heavily upon profitable and sometimes derivative new products (for example cholesterol-lowering drugs) rather than on drugs that will treat major illnesses (Angell 2000). The sleeping sickness and its treatment can illustrate the way that drugs industries are focusing its intentions.

Sleeping sickness is caused by a small parasite that leads to a serious infection in the brain and the meninges. The parasites are carried by the tsetse fly¹. These flies spread the disease through much of Africa, killing thousands of people a year. With a bite, these bloodsuckers inject deadly parasites into their human victims. As the parasites multiply, the person grows agitated and confused, slurs their speech, and stumble. Finally come coma and death (Petersen 2008).

The pharmaceutical company that manufactured the medicine, a drug called eflornithine, abandoned it in 1995, seeing no profit in selling it in poor countries. Nevertheless, a few years later, in the United States, where millions of women are worried about unwanted facial hair, another company began selling eflornithine in the form of a depilatory cream to minimize female mustaches².

Medicines can and do save lives (Antibiotics have saved millions of people from infections to give just one example). However, for the pharmaceutical industry, disease meant money, suffering brought profit. In this sense, their argument is simple: poor countries (like those in Africa) cannot afford their 'product', the company will not get any benefits, and so, they decide to stop producing it.

On the other hand, as Fishman (2004) points out, pharmaceutical companies produce not only drugs but also the medico-scientific knowledge that justifies the product's value as the solution to a problem. Drugs are promoted 'through scientific claims about the medical benefit, efficacy and necessity, supposedly revealed by objective clinical research' (Fishman, 2004: 189), with clinical trials serving not only to provide evidence of efficacy and safety, but also to legitimate products through an apparent separation between science and commercial interests (Fox & Ward 2008). However, the medicine merchants have learned to sell us our hopes and dreams, a pill for our every desire.

"After listening to the marketers, Americans now ask for prescriptions to treat baldness, low sex drive, and menopause, all once considered a normal part of aging. Problems like heartburn and constipation which are uncomfortable but hardly life-threatening now demand a trip to the doctor. We now have clinical names and treatment guidelines for unhappiness, loneliness, and shyness, as if it were no longer okay to feel the emotions that make a life" (Petersen, 2008:23).

¹ http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/travel/diseases/sleeping_sickness.htm

² Bardem J. (Director). (2007). *Invisibles* [Documentary film]. Spain: Pinguin Film.

Marketing departments carefully focus the publicity strategies and the format of their products in such a way that people can possibly feel a relief using them from the very beginning. In other words, before the effect on the well-being of the person, individuals could possibly experience a placebo effect. The placebo effect is the phenomenon whereby a patient's symptoms can be alleviated by an otherwise ineffective treatment; most likely because the individual expects or believes that the treatment will work³.

I would like to share a personal experience. When I was 14 years old I was diagnosed with “panic syndrome”⁴, a state in which the person feels fear and anxiety without any specific reason. The psychiatrist decided to prescribe me anti-depressant pills. Honestly, I was relieved with my diagnosis; I was not the only one with a specific kind of ‘problem’. But when I got my medicines I felt almost ‘cured’. The name of my pills was ‘*Humor-up*’ (mood up), the box was purple, a friendly presentations. Years after I can say that in some way, possibly, I had experienced a placebo effect, nevertheless, I did feel better and this is why I decided to stop taking those pills. However, when I visited the doctor, he said to me: “...now we will reduce the dose, you are a very anxious person and we do not want you to relapse”. I received my prescription and then I left the room thinking about my life as a dependant person who was not going to be able to live as a ‘normal’ individual. But this is another story.

Finally, it may be that marketing does not necessarily create false needs, as Rose (2007) suggests, but it may create false expectations about the capacity of pharmaceuticals to meet those needs and this is, definitely, antiethical and unfair.

Pharmaceuticals in the daily life

“...well people are sick people who simply don't know it-yet”
Jules Romaines

Having explained the power and the authority of biomedicine and the aggressive marketing campaigns to sell biomedical drugs it is not difficult to understand why some medicines have become an essential part of our daily diet.

³ http://www.ukskeptics.com/explanation.php?dir=articles/explanations&article=placebo_effect.php

⁴ The doctor defined my panic syndrome as follows: Panic Syndrome is a clinical case on which acute anxiety crisis arrives, panic crisis. In almost all the cases, panic crisis arrive without reason, suddenly and at unexpected moment.

“Some pharmaceuticalization theorists assert that we are seeing the pharmaceuticalization of domestic life because our bedrooms and kitchens are now foci for pharmaceutical marketing and consumption” (Fox and Ward, 2009: 41).

Abraham (2009) defines ‘pharmaceuticalization’ as ‘the process by which social, behavioral or bodily conditions are treated or deemed to be in need of treatment, with medical drugs by doctors or patients’ (2009: 100). Therefore, is it possible to suggest that there is a pharmaceuticalization of everyday life as the pharmaceutical industry introduces profitable medicines for a range of daily activities, moreover, the consumers consider these medicines as “magic bullets” to resolve problems of daily life, for example, the ability to sleep, to improve sexual life, to control weight and so forth (Fox & Ward, 2008).

Another factor that contributes to this pharmaceuticalization process is the ‘view of the time’. We are living in a world where time is money and ‘there is no time to be sick’. Therefore, biomedical drugs act as time-saving devices that enable people to fulfill responsibilities at work and/or home (Vuckovic 1999). Regarding this fact, self-medication is a choice that allows people to: save money, time, avoid medical conflicts and negative experiences. Some people could prefer different healing systems as homeopathic medicine; however, when ‘time is money’ they could be seen as useless.

As Fox & Ward (2008) suggest, the pharmaceuticalisation of life affects the consumption of drugs associated with daily life, but perhaps more importantly the ways in which elements of our private lives are understood.

Conclusion

The power and authority that locate Biomedicine in a favorable situation in the world makes biomedical drugs the channel to spread this ‘power’ to millions of people around the globe. Definitely, medicines could be effective and satisfy people’s needs. However, the relationship between pharmaceuticals and marketing makes us think that, sometimes, this effectiveness could be overdimensioned creating false expectations in the society and new ‘meds fans’ of some product that probably before the massive marketing campaigns they would have never used it.

The remarkable profitable intentions of these companies call into question their scientific researches:

“The companies seemed to have little interest in getting to the bottom of what was actually causing cancer, heart failure, or diabetes. Instead, they focused like honeybees circling a picnic cake on products for what they called chronic disorders. These were drugs that did not cure but “managed” diseases as patients took them once a day for the rest of their lives” (Petersen, 2008:19)

Finally, we have seen how the ‘pharmaceuticalization’ of our daily life has changed our way to understand our health, body and families. There is a ‘pill’ for every ‘problem’, especially in the present where there is no time to be sick, this biomedical drugs ‘effectiveness’ is really convenient for many people and, therefore, for the drugs industry.

After this analysis it is possible to understand why many people consider biomedical drugs as the most effective form of healing. However, if there is an obvious relationship between its massive usage and effectiveness I would say no. There is a favorable setting for pharmaceutical companies around the globe and, as I tried to show in this essay, there are many factors that contribute to make this scenario even stronger. Nevertheless, for those of us who realize about certain realities of these companies, the panorama looks very different.

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