

When Capitalism Kills: The Cautionary Story of the Sackler Family

¹Nica Shkolnik, BA

¹Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

In a New York Times interview with Elizabeth E. Sackler, Ms. Sackler called Purdue Pharma's role in the opioid crisis as "morally abhorrent". This company is owned by 8 of the 18 living members of the Sackler family. How could the reputation of a Jewish family who rose from the humble roots of Polish-Ukrainian immigrants, fought for racial integration in the 60s, donated millions to the arts, and who brought pain-relieving medication to 18 million Americans and 800,000 Israelis with moderate to severe chronic pain, receive such a scathing slur? [1,4]

This is not the story of a family who sought to intentionally harm a vulnerable subset of patients, but is rather a rags-to-riches story of an entrepreneurial Jewish family whose ancestral fight to survive was adulterated by American capitalism. In this article, I argue that the prescription-hungry, money-powered philosophy behind medical systems warps the physician's interpretation of the Hippocratic maxim "First do no harm."

In the late 1960s, three Sackler brothers bought a pharmaceutical company called Purdue Pharma, and in 2018 four lawsuits were filed against the company and against members of the Sackler family for promoting oxycodone as not having addictive qualities.[2] Opioids are agonists of μ receptors in the central and peripheral nervous system. They are G_i protein-coupled receptors that cause inhibition of adenylyl cyclase, leading to decreased cAMP concentration, increased K⁺ conductance, and decreased Ca²⁺ conductance, which ultimately prevents the release of acetylcholine, norepinephrine, serotonin, glutamate, and substance P (a key protein involved in the transmission of pain) leading to the



inhibition of pain. [3] They are highly addictive and often used for post-operative care, severe acute injuries, and chronic pain related to advanced medical illnesses, such as cancer.

In the United States, the popular opinion is that the Sacklers played a huge part in creating the ongoing opioid crisis. The family is often falsely credited with inventing the drug, however, they only marketed it (albeit with questionable incentives such as all-expenses paid weekend conferences to high-opioid prescribing physicians and lucrative incentives to sales representatives). The thinking goes, that by falsely promoting opioids as not being as addictive as they are, more of them were being prescribed, and without knowing the proper way to use or regulate them. Now healthcare providers, government committees, and lawmakers are left to deal with the wake of Purdue Pharma's harmful, yet influential advertising.

Liberal media has been quick to cancel the Sackler family.[5] However, as tempting as it is to arouse emotions for the nearly 500,000 people who died from an opioid overdose from 1999 to 2019, it is vitally important that journalists represent stories to accurately and exhibit restraint in public finger-pointing.[2]

There is no doubt that oxycodone has helped many people. One could argue that making oxycodone more easily available helped those suffering from chronic and severe pain (about 9% of the Israeli population).[4] However, Israel's 125% rise in opioid prescribing between 2011 and 2016 has been ringing some alarm bells in the Health Ministry, especially troubling since data from the US reveals that four out of five heroin initiates had previously used prescription opioids before progressing to illicit drugs.[2]

Although the rise in prescribing is concerning, there have been steps in Is-

rael to combat it. The Department for the Treatment of Substance Abuse is trying to address the issue of underreporting of opioid deaths, and to work towards the expansion of naloxone (opioid reversal treatment) beyond ambulance drivers and hospitals, and the establishment of a countrywide electronic database that tracks controlled substance prescriptions.

David Papo, the chairman of the Israel Pharmacists Association said in 2018, "There's no doubt that, given what's going on in the world, we are on the brink of an epidemic here. We're in war, so we need to take drastic measures."⁴

In this narrative of a Jewish immigrant family trying their luck at the American dream, the Sackler family touches a sensitive nerve in the collective Jewish medical body. A good section of students at the Sackler Faculty of Medicine are members of the Jewish diaspora, so witnessing the damaging narratives floating around the media regarding Jewish physicians, we are triggered by news headlines that lean into stereotypes of greed and fraud. Acknowledging this emotional context, it is also essential

to acknowledge the cultural context in which the Sacklers created their reputation - by all accounts, an extraordinary feat. However, it is equally important to study the actions that have made them one of the most infamous families in America. Their story should be used as a cautionary tale about private industry's ability to subvert what is objectively beneficial for patients.

I am not arguing for the dismantling of the Sackler name itself, rather the dismantling of Sacklers and their legacy that ignores the damage they are responsible for. It would calm the medical hivemind to see the Faculty of Medicine write a public letter acknowledging the morally abhorrent acts committed by members of the Sackler family hiding behind the name of Purdue Pharma. Furthermore, they should make information or their own attempt at contextualization of the Sackler's responsibilities readily available on their website and social media. By doing this, the program would set an example of how we should always strive to make ethical decisions in our medical careers. While we may

not be able to undo the harm done by the Sacklers (no matter how many patients we treat), we can do our best to understand and acknowledge their actions. After all, as Einstein said, "only morality in our actions can give dignity and beauty to life."

Corresponding Author

Nica Shkolnik
Email: veronicak@mail.tau.ac.il

References

1. Nadeau SE, Wu JK and Lawhern RA (2021) *Opioids and Chronic Pain: An Analytic Review of the Clinical Evidence*. *Front. Pain Res.* 2:721357. doi: 10.3389/fpain.2021.721357
2. Keefe, P. R. (2021). *Empire of pain: the secret history of the Sackler dynasty*. First edition. New York: Doubleday.
3. Sadiq NM, Dice TJ, Mead T. *Oxycodone*. [Updated 2022 Mar 21]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2022 Jan-.
4. Dolev, D., 2022. *Shomrim - The prescription plague: One in 10 Israelis in danger of opioid addiction*. [online] Hashomrim.org.
5. Mann, B. (2021, September 2). *The Sacklers, Who Made Billions From OxyContin, Win Immunity From Opioid Lawsuits*. NPR.org. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/01/1031053251/sackler-family-immunity-purdue-pharma-oxycotin-opioid-epidemic>

JIMS want

YOU

JIMS Committee International is Recruiting
get involved!

jims.org.il