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Reviews the film, Side Effects directed by Kathleen Slattery-Moschkau (2005). Taking a pill may be easy, but then there are the side effects, and those can be potentially dangerous (e.g., in the case of certain psychiatric drugs). Side Effects, a critical film that goes behind the scenes of the pharmaceutical industry, raises questions about the efficacy and safety of drugs and challenges the ethical standards of Big Pharma. It contrasts the proclaimed goal of manufacturing helpful drugs with the potentially contradictory economic incentives driving the pharmaceutical companies' actions. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2009 APA, all rights reserved)
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Big Pharma Versus Small Patient

Review By: Amir Raz
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Review of: Side Effects
By: Kathleen Slattery-Moschkau (Director), (2005).

Taking a pill may be easy, but then there are the side effects, and those can be potentially dangerous (e.g., in the case of certain psychiatric drugs). *Side Effects*, a critical film that goes behind the scenes of the pharmaceutical industry, raises questions about the efficacy and safety of drugs and challenges the ethical standards of Big Pharma. To have a relationship with the drug industry is not inherently insidious—most countries with an advanced biomedical research infrastructure use commercial entities as an essential element of their technology-development process; however, practitioners as well as patients need to be sensitive to the influence of market forces on scientific representation as well as public opinion.

Kathleen Slattery-Moschkau, a former pharmaceutical representative who wrote, directed, and produced this independent movie, offers an insider's view into the inner workings of Big Pharma. As a researcher without ties to the pharmaceutical industry but with insights into at least some controversies surrounding psychiatric drugs (Raz, 2006), Amir Raz wanted to make certain that Slattery-Moschkau was not a disgruntled employee and that her account was realistic. He therefore reached out to a Columbia University psychology postbaccalaureate student, Joy K. Harrington, who had been a Big Pharma drug rep for almost a decade and who agreed to coauthor this review.

According to Slattery-Moschkau (and Harrington concurs), reps are attractive, young individuals who are often minimally qualified for the job but who are “trained” by a well-lubricated drug marketing machine to bolster company sales. The reward—that is, generous compensation with perks—blinds the rep into a mind-numbing acquiescence with specious industry slogans (e.g., “to better human lives”) and inadequate ethics. *Side Effects* contrasts the proclaimed goal of manufacturing helpful drugs with the potentially contradictory economic incentives driving the pharmaceutical companies’ actions.

Although lay people may consider *Side Effects* to be a satirical look at the goings on (high jinks) in the pharmaceutical industry, Harrington felt that the film accurately depicts a rep's world, including the dubious promotional techniques and marketing tactics encouraged by Big Pharma—for example, a campaign aimed at creating or increasing anxiety (Ferner, 1994). Harrington recalls that reports of an especially harsh winter, with respiratory illnesses predicted to hit an all-time high, are a good way to fuel sales, as marketing teams clamor to carefully script a message designed to capitalize on the public's vulnerabilities.

Efficacy and safety issues aside, one of the main reasons drugs are so widely prescribed is the effective marketing. Big Pharma engages in multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns. Drug prescribers may think that they are immune to these vigorous efforts, but few are genuinely

unmoved. A recent study in *Nature* reported that 15.5 percent of researchers admit to "changing the design or results of a study in response to pressure from a funding source" (Martinson, Anderson, & de Vries, 2005). Given these data, clinicians need to ensure that any financial or commercial interests they may have in pharmaceutical companies do not affect their judgment in providing patient care. However, the industry does influence the interpretation and reporting of results, encourages the dismissal of negative results as erroneous (e.g., failed trials), and promotes the repeated dissemination of positive data in different guises (Ferner, 2005). Indeed, pharmaceutical industry funding for drug research correlates with favorable reports in peer-reviewed articles concerning the tested drug. For instance, among the authors of original research articles, reviews, and letters to the editor that were supportive of the use of specific drugs, 96 percent had financial relationships with the drugs' manufacturers; for publications deemed neutral or critical, the figures were only 60 percent and 37 percent, respectively. In addition, because negative results are typically discounted or not published, the message conveyed to the popular press and hence to the public is often positively skewed, emphasizing benefits over risks and predicting improbable breakthroughs. Such a climate is misleading and may propel unrealistic expectations concerning scientific advances or products, not to mention inappropriate and expensive utilization patterns (Raz, 2006).

In July 2002, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America implemented a new code of conduct to address this problem, spelling out acceptable and unacceptable behavior between health care professionals and drug representatives. Consequently, flagrant marketing aimed at soliciting business has begun to decrease. Describing practices of Big Pharma in the United Kingdom, however, the House of Commons Health Committee (2005) recently reported on the influence of the pharmaceutical industry and found an enterprise that buys influence over doctors, charities, patient groups, journalists, and politicians and whose regulation is sometimes weak or ambiguous. Such reports identify many areas of influence and distortion and suggest the need for better scrutiny of the marketing practices of pharmaceutical companies (Raz, 2006).

Accounts questioning the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and health care professionals have been receiving increased exposure in the media, including in recent films (Meirelles, 2005), books (Abramson, 2005; Angell, 2004; Kassirer, 2004), scientific articles (Ferner, 2005; Raz, 2006), and newspaper reports (Carey, 2005). These accounts typically explore the ways our reliance on prescription medicines are sustained and broadened by Big Pharma's pursuit of maximizing profits. However, as *Side Effects* points out, the problem may hinge on sponsored clinical trials more than on the blatant marketing attempts of comely, albeit callow, reps who essentially parrot a product's tag line. In the drug business, data must not be hidden because of commercial interests; however, unfortunately, at least some data continue to be unavailable to the public (Lenzer, 2005). Important first steps toward a remedy, which *Side Effects* does not broach, include a public registry of all initiated clinical trials together with complete transparency of and public access to all raw data.

Side Effects is a low-budget, independent film shining a welcome light on a timely controversy. Desiring to retain the purity of her screenplay, Slattery-Moschkau turned down an offer to have Hollywood pick up the script and modify it into a potentially greater commercial success. The result is a nice effort that refreshingly highlights Big Pharma and its reps' attempts to drive market share. Thus, if you are looking for Hollywood glamour, seek elsewhere, but if you are

interested in a fictionalized, albeit quixotic, insider's perspective into the pharmaceutical industry's dirty laundry—enjoy.

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