

Bad Pharma: How Drug Companies Mislead Doctors and Harm Patients

by Ben Goldacre, MD

Discussed by the Liberal Ladies Book Group on May 29, 2019

Dr Goldacre begins his book by saying that “medicine is broken” and proceeds in the 6 chapters to explain the who, what, where, how and why of the status of drug development, sales and marketing in this country and abroad. The author is passionate and knowledgeable about what he sees as a crisis in the field of medicine specific to pharmaceutical companies and their practices.

Reviewers of this book have said that it will make you enraged. The book group discussion was “lively” to say the least. The context of the book is highly clinical with descriptions of industry-funded vs independent studies that are done on medications in the trial stages. The author provides detailed meta-analyses and evidence, or lack thereof, of the efficacy of usage on patients. Readers will learn about the “birth” of a medication from the time it is chemically developed in a lab, the animal and human trials, FDA approval, and marketing including how information is provided to physicians and practitioners. While the book group agreed that the research and development specifics are far more detailed than what most consumers choose to read about, we feel that this is information of which everyone needs to be aware. Dr Goldacre calls for a systematic review of the pharmaceutical industry. Some of the specific problems that he feels need to be addressed include: the fact that negative drug trial results disappear; regulators withhold study reports and make the data they have difficult to access; regulators provide accelerated approval of drugs, who is monitoring patient side effects (doctors or drug companies)?

The chapter on Marketing was eye-opening in terms of the fact that the United States spends more than \$3 billion a year on drugs and that \$1 billion a year is wasted on doctors using “me-too” drugs in situations where equally effective off-patent drugs are available.

What does Dr Goldacre propose that we can do? A few of his suggestions include: Drug advertising should be banned. Ban the practice in the US of selling information on patient drug usage. Be wary of people selling new diseases with new cures. Be aware that that medical journalists and newspapers are paid by drug companies to write about favorable outcomes with usage of their drugs.

When asked why he wrote this book, the author responded that “we need to fix a set of problems that have been allowed to persist in my own profession for far too long. Drug companies could easily turn a profit without misleading doctors, or hiding unflattering data. These problems have a real impact on patient care because we don’t have the information we need to choose the most effective treatments for patients.”