

## Martha Rosenberg: Born with a junk food deficiency: how flacks, quacks, and hacks pimp the public health

Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 2012, 373 pp, ISBN: 978-1-61614-593-4 (cloth)

Ann E. Reisner

Accepted: 1 December 2013 / Published online: 19 January 2014  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

*Born with a Junk Food Deficiency* is a classic muckraking expose of two major industries that directly affect what we, the public, take into our bodies—the pharmaceutical and the agri-food industry. The author, Martha Rosenberg, is a freelance writer, editorial cartoonist and internet health columnist whose work has appeared in a variety of highly influential and prestigious newspapers (e.g., *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) as well as in well-known websites (*Huffington Post*, *AlterNet*, and *Counterpoint*).

Although the author does not have an explicit analysis of the power structure, she identifies—through multiple examples—an interesting repetitive pattern of the important players in pharmaceutical and food products, including attention to related agricultural production. Essentially she assigns the responsibility of risky medications and agricultural additions to industry, sometimes identified as the entire sector (e.g., Parma or AgriBiz), sometimes as specific companies, and sometimes as occupational groups—investors on Wall Street, marketers, scientists, doctors, medical journals, public relations and ghost writing firms, and/or the lawyers who collectively enable products to continue or to expand into public markets (p. 51).

The process of product placement and development, as described by the author, in the main follows this pattern: The marketers create markets for drugs (or genetically engineered food or factory raised or slaughtered animals) by emphasizing the advantages of the product or process and by ignoring the possibility that the drug (or food) has

disadvantages, in other words by following standard marketing protocols.

Marketers use a variety of practices to promote research that demonstrates the effectiveness and safety of their product, including funding researchers. Pharmaceutical companies also promote doctors who give testimonials about how beneficial their drugs/food/animals are, develop educational programs for doctors (particularly with drugs) and—in a variety of ways—promote the effectiveness of their product. The author notes that the industry, or pharmaceutical company, or industry-funded university researchers rarely offer retractions even after the research has been falsified or the product has been shown to have substantive problems.

The marketing to doctors or directly to patients—or in the case of agriculture, to the food producer—continues even after problems become increasingly evident. In some cases, the original use of the product is abandoned, in others the marketers continue to sell in the original area and simply add a move to additional markets from their original repertoire. In either case, marketers move to additional markets when possible.

For example, Seroquel, initially promoted as “significantly superior” to “older psychiatric drugs” (pg. 91) on evidence that the researcher Charles Schultz, MD, later qualified—saying that the old and new drugs were “about the same”—was initially promoted as a first class anti-psychotic and then advocated as a treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The move was made without, according to this author, addressing already evident problems such as a repeated pattern of additional deaths, particularly when these drugs were taken with other drugs (p. 93).

In chapter after chapter the author points out that as problems arise with the drugs, marketers counter, suppress

---

A. E. Reisner (✉)  
Department of Media and Cinema Studies, University of Illinois  
at Urbana-Champaign, 237 Gregory Hall, 810 South Wright  
Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA  
e-mail: reisnera@illinois.edu

or ignore evidence, attack doctors or researchers who are warning against the drug and or use educational programs to warn against discontinuing treatment. All this, the author repeatedly points out, while continuing to promote, and expand when possible, the drug's use.

The author is clearly impassioned and committed to her project, but a series of difficulties reduce its overall usefulness in either the classroom or for serious scholarly research. First, the individual chapters lack an organizing structure that clearly and cleanly leads the reader from either one topic to another or from one time period to the next. For example, a series of examples on the problems with hormone replacement therapy for women moved rapidly from the 1940s, to the 1960s, the 2000s, back to the 1970s, forward to the 1990s, back again (1980s), forward (2000s), back (1970) and then forward again to the early 21st century. Individually these examples were interesting and important, but either a linear organization or an organized set of examples based on topical flow would have greatly eased the clarity of the argument for the reader.

A second difficulty with the book is its reliance on secondary sources abstracted from the original source. So, for example, the claim that "prescription drugs kill more people a year than traffic accidents" is sourced from a National Public Radio broadcast, September 27, 2011. In some chapters, self-citations approach 10 % of all of the citations used, although it is clear from the context of the writing that the original source of the information was some other authority.

A final difficulty with reading the book is the lack of a clear analysis of where to go next. Although deeply critical of the pharmaceutical industry and agri-business, the author stops at the level of criticism, rather than moving forward to discussion of what and how to work toward a better society. Furthermore, identifying such a general occupational classification, "marketers", as the primary villain also reduces the clarity of what action can be taken. Overall, the book leaves one with the strong feeling that "something" should be done, but very little idea of where to go to do it.

**Ann Reisner** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Cinema Studies in the College of Media and the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research and teaching focus on mass media and social movements, particularly those concerned with environmental and agricultural issues. She is currently working on *Watching the Environment*, an analysis of the use of film to promote agricultural and environmental activism. Her teaching areas are media effects, environmental communications, and the sociology of the press.