

# Editorial

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## Pharmaism

Criticising the pharmaceutical industry is a type of sport, and it is astonishing what nonsense people will believe about it. For example, it has been said that pharmaceutical companies will only conduct a clinical trial against another product that will show their own product in a favourable light. This is a facile criticism. Of course pharmaceutical companies do not run clinical trials that can be predicted to have a negative outcome. Clinical trials are expensive and a pharmaceutical company is a commercial business. It does not make sense for any company in any industry to spend money advertising another company's product. What does make sense is for the competitor company to pay for the trial that shows their own product to be better; *ipso facto* the company with the better product pays for the trial.

It is probably the fact that pharmaceutical companies make a profit from selling drugs to treat our ailments that underlies people's antipathy towards it. The alternatives to having the development of potential new medicines funded by a business include for governments to fund the work (i.e. for us to pay through our taxes), for drugs to be developed by charities (i.e. for us to pay through our donations), or for no further research to be done (i.e. we keep our money and hope we do not develop an illness for which there is currently no effective treatment). None of the alternatives are viable or acceptable and the pharmaceutical industry continues to thrive.

The media paints a picture of the pharmaceutical industry as being populated by overweight executives in dark suits, jet-setting around the globe making business deals that line their own pockets and those of their friends, the shareholders. These ogres are responsible for publishing positive data, hiding negative data, and misleading the vulnerable.

Any company that develops any product has to advertise and sell that product otherwise the company will be in business for a very short time. The pharmaceutical industry is no different and criticising the industry for its marketing is just target

practice. All advertising material for all industries must comply with advertising codes, which include the requirement to hold documentary evidence to prove all claims, whether direct or implied, and not to be misleading. In the particular case of the pharmaceutical industry, the company's medical director is at personal risk of criminal prosecution for any breaches of the advertising code, which is an effective incentive (if one were needed) for ensuring that any claims made in marketing materials can be substantiated.

Not publishing negative data is not the same thing as hiding it. The worst that the pharmaceutical industry can reasonably be accused of is putting a positive spin on its products by highlighting the positive aspects. This is not a news story and it's not 'bad' behaviour; it's just marketing. Imagine an advertising campaign in which the actor uses a shampoo, shrugs his shoulders and says, 'It's alright I suppose'. Or Mrs Average Housewife looks at the bottle of ketchup handed to her and says, 'I'm sure it's very nice but I buy the supermarket's own brand because it's cheaper'. We do not see advertisements for breakfast cereals that bring the sugar content of the products to our attention. There is nothing new or unusual about advertising materials promoting the positive, unique selling point of a product.

To suggest that an industry is good or bad is to suggest that each person employed in that industry is good or bad. This is stereotyping. A company is an entity in law but it is composed of individual people. It is like saying that the British go to Ibiza on holiday and get very drunk. Of course there are people for whom this is an accurate description of their behaviour but they represent a tiny percentage of British people. Like a country, a company can have a culture but we cannot assume that every person who works for the company agrees with the culture, or feels comfortable with it. On the contrary, many employees have a healthy scepticism of corporate mission statements and values.

The pharmaceutical industry is a success story, creating employment, contributing to gross domestic product, and developing new treatments for

disease. People who work for the industry are employed in manufacturing, drug discovery, information technology, distribution, formulation research, human resources, administrative support, clinical research, catering, marketing, cleaning, sales, administrative support, and so on. A pharmaceutical company is not a sentient creature; it is a conglomeration of normal people who are also The Public and often The Patient. In all walks of life, people want to earn a living, preferably doing work that they enjoy, so that they can have enough money to eat, be warm and dry, spend time with family and friends, have a few nice things and go on holiday now and then.

We can draw an analogy with the negative publicity about bankers' bonuses, which gave us the impression that everyone who works for a bank is rewarded annually with an enormous bonus that is higher than most of us will earn in our lifetime. If this isn't terrible enough, these are the people who are responsible for the current global economic crisis. In reality, very few employees of banks are investment bankers. Most bank employees earn a modest wage and will be lucky if their bonus (if they get one) is enough for them to afford to buy a new washing machine.

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### Author information

**Wendy Kingdom** is a freelance medical writer with more than 25 years of experience in clinical research and medical writing.

Most of us who work in or for the pharmaceutical industry do our work diligently, honestly, and responsibly. We take pride in our work, we take the regulations seriously, and we work to high ethical standards because we believe that it is the right thing to do. We know that it is impossible to hide data from the Regulatory Authorities; any attempts to hide data would require a conspiracy worthy of a bestselling novel. We might have come across one or two individuals who have not made us feel proud to be working for the same company – as with all stereotypes, there is a grain of truth in there somewhere. Nonetheless, stereotyping has more to do with what people want to believe than what is necessarily factually correct, logical or reasonable. History should teach us to be wary.

As for the shareholders, the major ones are usually pension companies. We should all wish them many happy returns on their investments.

### Disclaimers

Wendy Kingdom is a freelance medical writer for the pharmaceutical industry. The views expressed in this article, including any errors, are entirely her own and do not represent the views of EMWA.