

A Doctor's Guide to What to Read on the Opioid Crisis

By Abigail Zuger

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Medical knowledge is evolving at warp speed, spinning out reams of new information into sound bites, articles and more and more new health books to overload your sagging shelves.

But if you're tempted to toss out all the old stuff, better think twice — despite the changes in medical science, some constants endure. The human body still sickens and recovers much the way it always has; our dogged, heartfelt efforts to prevent and relieve pain and suffering are no different than they ever were. Even books published decades or in some cases centuries in the past may still speak clearly to today's medical issues.

So squeeze all the shiny new books in among the dusty old ones, and let this column, Prescribed Reading, justify the clutter. When health care makes headlines, these occasional essays will take a look back at other volumes on that bulging shelf, for a curated perspective on resources available to the interested reader.

No health topic has made more news in this country over the last two decades than the opioid crisis, with heart-rending journalism and a handful of comprehensive books. Barry Meier's 2003 "Pain Killer" was the first to probe the deceptive advertising pushing the addictive prescription opioid OxyContin into the American market. Sam Quinones's compulsively readable "Dreamland" linked the popularity of OxyContin to an exploding nationwide traffic in a cheaper alternative, potent Mexican heroin. Beth Macy's recent "Dopesick" outlined the synergistic destruction that legal and illegal narcotics wreak on users and their communities.

[*Read more of The Times's opioid coverage: What happens when overdoses are public | Inside West Virginia's crisis*]

These authors all covered a similar territory of clueless doctors, rapacious drug sales forces (both the corporate and the criminal varieties), hurting patients and their frantic friends and relatives.

Some may wonder what America's doctors could have been thinking all those years, doling out quantities of potent narcotics like so many aspirin. Granted, a few of us were criminals, methodically defrauding Medicaid in pill-dispensing "mills." But mostly we were just well-intentioned schlubs with prescription pads, dutifully following then-current practice guidelines.

It is impossible to overstate how difficult it was a dozen years ago to ignore the resounding calls for effective pain control by any means possible, narcotic dependency be damned. Our leaders, our teachers, our regulatory agencies and our patients demanded no less. The slick ad campaigns backing OxyContin and all the other addictive prescription opioids assured us all would be well.

Dr. Anna Lembke's small but powerful "Drug Dealer, MD" summarizes other seldom-enunciated reasons doctors became complicit. A specialist at Stanford in addiction medicine, Lembke delivers a bottom line as bizarre as it is true: Most doctors hate and fear dealing with pain, and are utterly unequipped to do so. Treating pain properly requires specialized training; it consumes vast amounts of time few doctors have. It requires an ability to set limits and negotiate and to fail and fail again.

And, as Lembke points out, doctors are a group chosen for more or less exactly the opposite characteristics. We are habitual pleasers, accustomed — even addicted — to patients' admiration and gratitude. We like to do what we do well, and most of us don't do pain well. So it's no big surprise that when we find ourselves in a pain-filled room we just want to escape fast, and prescribing another round of pills lets us do just that.

What about the part played by pharmaceutical companies in this crisis? Was Purdue Pharma, manufacturer of OxyContin, an aberration in its misleading promotion of the drug, with assertions that ultimately resulted in \$600 million in fines and penalties? Or is this just how Big Pharma always operates, dodging the law and relevant moral principles in single-minded pursuit of Big Profit?

Back in 2004, Dr. Marcia Angell, a former editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, wrote in "The Truth About Drug Companies" that the pharmaceutical industry "has moved very far from its original high purpose of discovering and producing useful new drugs." Her book presents instead a vision of an industry motivated largely by greed. Pretty much every specific outrage critics have identified in Purdue's behavior appears in Angell's analysis, including the "jaw-dropping" gifts doctors may receive for prescribing a company's drugs, the subtle advertisement masquerading as education and the lukewarm, often ineffective protestations by regulatory agencies.

Writing from Britain, Dr. Ben Goldacre echoes Angell's concerns, charging in "Bad Pharma" that the worst misbehavior in the pharmaceutical industry actually occurs not when prescription drugs are being burnished for market, but far earlier in their development. Lackluster compounds are evaluated in ways guaranteed to make them look good, Goldacre writes, then prettied up even further with distorted claims of efficacy. While "bad behavior in marketing departments is unpleasant," he concludes, the real scientific outrage and the big public danger lie in uniformly dubious practices of drug development.

The immersion journalist Barry Werth provided a more sympathetic view of the pharmaceutical industry after taking two deep dives into the workings of a young biotech company. In exchange for many years of fly-on-the-wall privileges at Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Werth allowed his manuscripts to be vetted by corporate executives, and presumably some of their sharper edges were sanded down. What remains, though, is an impressively detailed, dense epic in two volumes, "The Billion-Dollar Molecule" and "The Antidote," describing the truly herculean labors needed to birth a panel of marketable drugs.

Vertex developed early H.I.V. and hepatitis C drugs, and many of the executives Werth trails are clearly committed to the humanitarian aspects of their work. But they are also committed to their own proprietary molecules, sometimes with a passion bordering on worship. As the head of Vertex once announced at an industry conference, "It's a tremendous responsibility to live up to a molecule like VX-950." A regulator for the F.D.A. put it a little more bluntly, screaming over the phone to another Vertex executive, "You guys believe in your drug too much."

Opioid-dependent patients may be trapped in a web of pain and addiction for months, years or a lifetime. One of the most eloquent descriptions of that hard fate comes to us from more than 200 years ago, back in the days when opium and laudanum (a solution of opium in alcohol) were perfectly legal in England, and as widely available as, yes, aspirin is today. It was in the fall of 1804 that Thomas De Quincey, a 19-year-old wannabe intellectual, decided to try a little opium for a bad toothache.

When De Quincey published his “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater” 17 years later, his poetic depictions of the wild hallucinations that punctuated his years with the drug transfixed his contemporaries. To us, though, his story is revelatory mostly for its eerie familiarity.

As a writer, De Quincey was dominated and arguably ruined by his habit. He produced quantities of hack prose, but nothing as enduring as the “Confessions.” He lovingly embroidered the original version of that classic into sequels and revisions, all of which were increasingly wordy and decreasingly interesting. De Quincey had wonderful ideas he could never remember, often scribbled down on pieces of paper he could never find. What he might have accomplished sober is anyone’s guess.

Rx Pad

DRUG DEALER, MD: How Doctors Were Duped, Patients Got Hooked, and Why It’s So Hard to Stop, by Dr. Anna Lembke. The best summary around of the perils of owning a prescription pad.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE DRUG COMPANIES: How They Deceive Us and What to Do About It, by Dr. Marcia Angell. An eloquent classic. No one has despised Big Pharma for as long as Dr. Angell has.

BAD PHARMA: How Drug Companies Mislead Doctors and Harm Patients, by Dr. Ben Goldacre. Read it and you may never put another pill in your mouth.

THE BILLION-DOLLAR MOLECULE: The Quest for the Perfect Drug, by Barry Werth. **THE ANTIDOTE: Inside the World of New Pharma**, by Barry Werth. The drug business presented meeting by meeting. Tedious, but you won’t find this level of detail anywhere else.

CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER, by Thomas De Quincey. Bear with the antique prose for a mind-blowingly modern story line.

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