

Confessions of an Rx Drug Pusher

Gwen Olsen

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“Prescription drug use has become the third-largest killer of Americans behind heart disease and cancer,” author Gwen Olsen writes. “More than 180,000 people die annually from the effects of legal drugs.” This sobering fact is at the heart of Olsen’s provocative and chilling insider’s look at the pharmaceutical industry, the medical profession, and the government’s failure to provide adequate oversight.

For more than fifteen years, Olsen worked as a representative for major drug companies, enthusiastically introducing new drugs to doctors, even though the drugs might lack adequate long-term testing. She says that doctors’ prescription information is sold by pharmacies and tracked by the drug industry, and that reps are handsomely rewarded for sales.

“It would take many years and dozens of conscience-altering experiences before I really comprehended the scope of just how much my profession affected the medical industry and the contribution I had made to harming thousands of trusting people,” she writes.

The author’s confessions go beyond anger toward the pharmaceutical industry, the high cost of prescriptions, drug advertising, and the willingness of medical doctors to use pills in potentially lethal combinations. Olsen confesses her own drug use, which started in college, and the devastating effect that prescribed drugs had on her when she was depressed. She also confesses the wild dysfunction prevalent for generations in her family, and her struggles to find acceptance, meaning, and good health through taking responsibility for her own well-being.

If statistics, case studies, court cases, and scientific data about the dangers of prescription drugs aren’t enough to create a call to action, the heartbreaking story of Olsen’s niece, Meg, should do it. Olsen begins the book with the horror of Meg’s suicide by fire. Meg, a college student, had been given painkillers after an automobile accident, then took ephedra, and the combination gave her manic delusions. Olsen says Meg was later simultaneously prescribed narcotic analgesics, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, antidepressants, anxiolytics, antibiotics, muscle relaxants, anticonvulsants, and anti-psychotic meds. She became despondent, dropped out of school, used street drugs, never received therapy, and eventually killed herself. “Compassion is what Meg really needed, not more drugs,” Olsen writes.

Olsen’s research underscores her concerns about the wide use of prescription drugs and the devastating effects that can occur. The book is a mix of these reports and her personal observations of children and adults on heavy meds. Instead of asking doctors to prescribe glamorous advertised drugs, patients should be better consumers and ask questions about the clinical trials and side effects, she urges.

Well-written and thought-provoking, the book would be better served by a professionally designed cover, an index, and a foreword written by a medical professional to support Olsen’s conclusions.

Olsen’s book sounds a wakeup call, especially as the national healthcare debate continues to boil. Reform in the pharmaceutical industry alone could save dollars—and more importantly, lives.

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