

Pharmaceutical Companies and the Drug Addiction Epidemic: A Tale of Two Countries

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It is known that the current opioid epidemic in the U.S. is directly related to the fact that physicians have unconsciously prescribed opioid-based medicine to their patients. However, with a little digging, let alone a great number of research findings, we can find the opioid problem ultimately ascribed to pharmaceutical (pharma henceforth) companies. Pharma companies' strategic marketing, including the so-called "relationship marketing" on physicians and medical students to influence their prescribing behaviors,¹ and massive federal lobbying are the true causes of the opioid crisis. In the U.S., pharma companies' profit-driven, unethical practice is protected by law; such that their marketing and lobbying, are done within a legal context. In essence, what they do is unethical but legal. However, in Nigeria, a sub-Saharan African country of about 190 million and the seventh largest nation on earth, pharma companies pursue profits unethically and illegally. This trans-national comparison elicits these questions: Are the pharma companies in Nigerian more unethical than their U.S counterparts? What is the nature of law in business practice vis a vis ethics?

Today, thousands of Nigerians (and many other Africans), particularly young people including children, are addicted to codeine cough syrup, manufactured by Nigerian pharma companies. Unlike the expensive opioid prescription drugs behind the epidemic in the U.S., codeine found in some cough syrups is less expensive and easily purchased on street corners and over the counter without any regulation. Codeine is an effective painkiller that when consumed in large quantities, gives a feeling of ecstasy. Codeine is imported, but at least 20 pharma companies produce the cough syrup in Nigeria. In two northern states of Nigeria alone, it is estimated that residents consume more than 3 million bottles of the syrup each day². Consuming large amounts of codeine causes psychosis, organ failure, and death. It is legal that the pharma companies sell the opioid-based medicine for patients with prescriptions. However, as the pharma companies sell it to black market for profits, the opioid addiction in this twisted form, spreads with alarming speed across the country. People drink the syrup straight or mixed with Coca-Cola on streets corners, in markets, at bars and homes. At brothels,

¹ For the relationship marketing in detail, see Marta Makowska, Georg P. Sillup, and Marvin J. H. Lee, "Pharma's Marketing Influence on Medical Students and the Need for Culturally Competent and Stricter Policy and Educational Curriculum in Medical Schools: A Comparative Analysis of Social Scientific Research between Poland and the U.S." *The Journal of Healthcare Ethics & Administration* 3, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017): 19-33, <https://doi.org/10.22461/jhea.6.7161>.

² Kylie Kiunguyu, "Codeine Syrup Addiction is an Opioid Epidemic That is Sweeping the African Continent," *This is Africa (TIA)*, May 8, 2018, <https://thisisafrika.me/codeine-addiction-opioid-epidemic-sweeping-africa/>

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customers and sex workers enjoy the syrup to boost sexual pleasure. The alarming and troubling rate of addiction is destroying lives and ravaging families.³ Oluyemisi Ogun, the medical director at a psychiatric hospital in Lagos, Nigeria, says, “There is no family now that is not affected . . . Our children are at risk as much as our husbands, wives and other relatives.”⁴

It was only after the BBC’s 53-minute-long documentary film on the codeine epidemic with a full investigative detail, *Sweet Sweet Codeine*, was published online in April 2018 and circulated to international viewers, that the Nigerian government took a strong action.⁵ The government banned the import and manufacture of codeine-based syrup. However, critics say that the ban may not do much to stop the epidemic because the ban would only promote illegal manufacturing and price-hike in the black market.⁶ As expected, soon after the government ban was implemented, the black-market prices for the cough syrup skyrocketed.⁷

Then, the follow-up question becomes: who would manufacture and distribute the illegal cough syrup? It seems obvious that it will be the same pharma companies. The Nigerian pharma companies had run the illegal distribution for profit. In the documentary, during the conversation between the BBC undercover team and one executive of Emzor Pharmaceuticals (one of the pharma companies that produce the codeine-laced syrup); he boasts that his company sells one million cartons in a week on the black market.⁸ Because of the great demand, to manufacture the syrup in such a large scale requires a production capacity and capital. Thus, the ban will make the very pharma companies more profitable than before by selling their products with higher prices. One wonders what the ethical and legal measures would be to correct this aberration.

As is the case in many countries, including the U.S., the relationship between corporate business leaders and politicians is deeply entangled. Politicians who should pass legislations regulating unorthodox and unethical business practices accept huge contributions from the corporate world. It is suspected that the Nigerian politicians will let the pharma companies get away with the unethical practices as the U.S. politicians do the same for their pharma companies. Unlike the U.S., Nigeria still has a long way to go in building a sophisticated political *cum* legal system where the corruptions can be legally justified. Corruption in Nigeria is pervasive. Politicians and public officials loot public funds with little or no repercussions. Thus, the horrific ethics violations by the pharma companies are vividly displayed on a street-level, in an illegal context. But in the U.S., the same profit-driven outrageous unscrupulous practices by the pharma companies is concealed under the lobbyists’ shiny suits and sales reps’ lavishing gifts for doctors, of course, fully legal. Meanwhile, the ordinary Americans and Nigerians are dying and families are devastated.

As a Nigerian-American who has experienced both cultures, the rationale behind this editorial is not to blame the U.S. as a nation for having a more deceptive system than Nigeria, or downplay the Nigerian cough syrup epidemic, by showing that a similar unethical practice by pharma companies occurs everywhere, but to call for reflection on the relationship between ethics and law in a corporate context and seek a solution for it. It is germane to emphasize that what is legal is not always ethical and vice versa. Pharma companies have the right to make profit for their shareholders/stakeholders, but doing so excessively at the expense of the lives of ordinary people turns into corporate greed which is both immoral and unconscionable.

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⁴ “Nigerian Authorities Shut.”

⁵ “Sweet Sweet Codeine – inside Nigeria’s Deadly Cough Syrup Trade” [Documentary], *BBC News*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43982302>

⁶ “Nigerian Authorities Shut.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Siobhán O’Grady, “Nigeria Bans Codeine Cough Syrup to Stop an Addiction Epidemic. But Something Worse Could Take its Place,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/05/04/nigeria-bans-cough-syrup-to-stop-an-addiction-epidemic-but-something-worse-could-take-its-place/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b91564412504

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