

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Drugs: Are Americans Being Ripped Off ?”

Americans have the dubious honor of paying the highest costs for drugs on the planet, even more so than other rich countries such as Germany, Japan, and Canada. Drugs can be life saving and crucial in the prevention and treatment of illness but anything can be pushed over the top. Over half of the American population is on prescription medications and in 2013, over 4 billion pills were dispensed to a population of 330 million people, with many patients taking multiple pills (polypharmacy) and with some taking dozens on a daily basis. Differences in drug prices can be substantial, especially among the newer and very costly agents that have recently come on the market. Two years ago, oncologists at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) made a deliberate and measured decision to exclude a drug because of its exorbitant cost, and went public about it. The drug (afibercept, *Zaltrap*, Sanofi) was no more effective than older drugs but was twice as expensive. A *New York Times* op-ed piece said, "Soaring spending has presented the medical community with a new obligation. When choosing treatments for patients, we have to consider the financial strains they may cause alongside the benefits they may deliver." Sanofi ultimately discounted the price 50% but did not change *Zaltrap's* official price. This case is considered to be central to cancer drug pricing battles and it was the first time physicians stood up and said, "Enough is enough." Shockingly, of the 12 drugs approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for different cancer indications in 2012, 11 cost more than \$100,000 per year. Actually, the prices for oncology (cancer) agents have nearly doubled in the past decade, from an average of \$5000 per month to more than \$10,000 per month. Further, the cost of pharmaceutical agents that are already commercially available keeps rising and in some cases, quite significantly. Advertising dramatically influences sales and manufacturer spending on advertising was over 1.5 times as much in 2009 (\$10.9 billion) as in 1999 (\$6.6 billion). Television is saturated with drug advertisements, which have been run past focus groups, psychologists, and marketers to get the best marketing bang for their buck. In the olden days drug manufacturers had a dual mission of helping patients and of making a reasonable profit. Today, their primary interest is the financial return to their stock holders. Reports show that even drugs that are easy to develop, quick to manufacture, and receive support from foundations, government, and other sources, still come out with a very high price.

In the America that I love, drug prices are too high and there is no clear rationale for current drug pricing. How do you spell "rip off?"

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