

If You Want to Kill Drug Dealers, Start With Big Pharma

Large corporations are the true authors of the opioid crisis.



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At a recent rally in New Hampshire, Donald Trump called for the death penalty for drug traffickers as part of a plan to combat the opioid epidemic in the United States. At a Pennsylvania rally a few weeks earlier, he had called for the same.

Now his administration is taking steps toward making this proposal a reality.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a memo on March 21 asking prosecutors to pursue capital punishment for drug traffickers — a power he has thanks to legislation passed under President Bill Clinton¹.

Time and again, these punitive policies have proven ineffective at curbing drug deaths. That's partly because amping up the risk factor for traffickers makes the trade all that more lucrative, encouraging more trafficking, not less.

But it's also because these policies don't address the true criminals of the opioid crisis: *Big Pharma*.

If Trump really wanted to help, he'd put the noose around drug-making and selling giants like *Purdue Pharma*, *McKesson*, *Insys Therapeutics*, *Cardinal Health*, *AmerisourceBergen*, and others.

The president knows this, in a way. These companies “contribute massive amounts of money to political people,” he said at a press conference in October 2017² — even calling out Mitch McConnell, who was standing beside him, for taking that money. Pharmaceutical manufacturers were “getting away with murder,” Trump complained in the same speech.

For once, he's wasn't wrong.

The pharmaceutical industry spends more than any other industry on influencing politicians, *with two lobbyists for every member of Congress*. Nine out of ten House members and all but three senators have taken campaign contributions³ from *Big Pharma*.

¹ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/03/20/death-penalty-drug-dealers-trump-clinton-476374>

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/16/trump-says-massive-campaign-spending-fuels-rise-in-drug-prices.html>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/19/big-pharma-money-lobbying-us-opioid-crisis>

It's not just politicians they shell out for.

Opioid pioneer *Purdue Pharma*, the creator of *OxyContin*, bankrolled a campaign to change the prescription habits of doctors⁴ who were wary of the substance's addictive properties, going so far as to send doctors on all-expense-paid trips to pain-management seminars. The family that started it all is worth some \$13 billion today.

From 2008 to 2012, *AmerisourceBergen* distributed 118 million opioid pills to West Virginia alone⁵. That's about 65 pills per resident. In that same time frame, 1,728 people in the state suffered opioid overdoses.

McKesson — the fifth largest company in the U.S.⁶, with profits over \$192 billion — contributed 5.8 million pills to just one West Virginia pharmacy.

Meanwhile, five companies contributed more than \$9 million to interest groups⁷ for things like promoting their painkillers for chronic pain and lobbying to defeat state limits on prescribing opioids.

These companies don't stop at promoting opioids. They also spend big on stopping legislation that would actually help curb opioid use.

Insys Therapeutics, a company whose founder was indicted for allegedly bribing doctors to write prescriptions for *fentanyl* (a substance 50 times stronger than heroin), spent \$500,000 to stop marijuana legalization⁸ in Arizona in 2016.

In response, cities and states from New York City to Ohio are suing pharmaceutical companies for their role in the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans every year. It's time for the federal government to get behind them.

Of course, going after these companies isn't going to eliminate opioid abuse on its own. That will take combating the root social and economic causes that lead to so many deaths of despair.

But it's clear who the real profiteers of the opioid epidemic are.

If Trump wanted to get real about curbing incentives for selling opioids, he'd turn away from street dealers and target the real opioid-producing industry.

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⁴ <https://www.ips-dc.org/big-pharma-family-brought-us-opioid-crisis/>

⁵ <https://inequality.org/great-divide/pain-profiteers/>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/one-small-town-two-drug-companies-and-123-million-doses-of-opioids/2018/02/15/6436fe16-11a0-11e8-8ea1-c1d91fcec3fe_story.html?utm_term=.d3bf606eb6be

⁷ https://www.publicintegrity.org/2018/02/12/21567/opioid-makers-paid-millions-advocacy-groups-promoted-their-painkillers-amid?utm_source=email&utm_campaign=watchdog&utm_medium=publici-email&utm_source=Watchdog&utm_campaign=8beec9ef4-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_12_13&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_ffd1d0160d-8beec9ef4-100100949&mc_cid=8beec9ef4&mc_eid=adcf8f28d2

⁸ <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/medical-pot-is-our-best-hope-to-fight-the-opioid-epidemic-w513653>