

Young, Terence H. (2014) Death by Prescription. Oakville: Mosaic Press.

Reviewed by: Danika Bush, MacEwan University

In Terence H. Young's "Death by Prescription," the author delves deep into some of the major issues we face against the drug industry. Written following his personal involvement with the pharmaceutical industry, Young captures the struggles of everyone involved, ranging from the patient and consumer to the high-level executives, in trying to uncover the truth and repair the corruption hidden by Big Pharma. The book is heavily written using anecdotal evidence, but incorporates data from professionals in the pharmaceutical industry. It marries the emotional and the logical aspects of professional writing, resulting in a powerful narrative on losing a loved one while exposing the deep corruption of a worldwide industry.

Young's main focus throughout the book is the drug Prepulsid. Prepulsid had resulted in the death of his fifteen-year-old daughter, Vanessa, in the year 2000 after she had been wrongly prescribed the drug for a mild form of bulimia. Prepulsid was a drug primarily prescribed for patients who experienced gastric reflux, while it was contraindicated for patients who experienced vomiting. Bulimia, being a condition which is strongly characterized by vomiting, in combination with Prepulsid caused an adverse reaction in Vanessa, which resulted in cardiac arrhythmia. As an otherwise healthy young girl, her death was entirely preventable. This was what propelled Young, a grieving father, into his journey to file a lawsuit against Health Canada and prevent others from falling into the same situation he and his family had ended up in.

When considering all that would go into filing a lawsuit against Health Canada on behalf

of his late daughter, Young struggled with the idea that his family's privacy would be invaded. For a grieving family, the publicity that goes along with a lawsuit would cause unnecessary strain. Throughout the book, Young goes into detail about the emotional toll on his family. As he gathered evidence to support his case, his family was at the front of his mind. The flow of Young's writing effortlessly drifts back and forth between his research into Big Pharma and his personal struggles with the loss of a child and maintaining a family life in the midst of chaos.

Following Vanessa's death, Young fell deep into researching Prepulsid. He was looking for an answer and closure. His research turned up fruitful evidence of how Prepulsid was responsible for the damage caused. Young discovered four "Dear Doctor" letters -- letters sent out by Health Canada outlining various risks drugs might pose for patients. Prior to Vanessa's death, Prepulsid had been in questioning for months. The initial death count Young found for Prepulsid was eighty. He was shocked that eighty people had died as a result of taking the same drug his daughter was taking, and he had never been told. (It was later revealed that there were over 300 deaths as a result of taking Prepulsid; a figure hidden by Johnson & Johnson.) Upon speaking to a doctor at Health Canada, Young learned that Health Canada had very little power and say in what drugs remained on the shelves and what drugs were pulled from shelves. They were overruled by Johnson & Johnson. Health Canada also lacked the ability to publish any sort of press release to warn consumers of potential dangers of drugs. Johnson & Johnson had power over the government in virtually all aspects of prescription drug control in Canada. The shocking reality was that the Canadian government couldn't properly protect its citizens from a larger than life corporation.

Upon further research, Young discovered that there were alternatives to Prepulsid; contradictory to what he had heard from Janssen-Ortho (Johnson & Johnson's Canadian

Bush

counterpart) in a previous conversation he had had with them. This led to his discovery of what are known as drug patents: drugs are given a patent of twenty years. This means once the twenty years are over, other companies can produce the same drug (same molecular structure) and sell it off-brand. Therefore, companies push new drugs on customers so as to keep them around. This was why Prepulsid was pushed so hard on doctors to prescribe.

Throughout preparing for a lawsuit against Health Canada, Young aligned himself with different lawyers and former drug industry professionals. He gathered any and all insight he could on the more sinister actions going on behind closed doors in the pharmaceutical industry. Instead of pulling drugs from shelves, companies issued warnings. They knew these warnings were too often ignored or not received by doctors, which could end up with adverse effects as extreme as death. The reason they sent out warnings was for legal purposes; not health or safety concerns. The drug industries followed the money, even if the money left a blood trail, as it did with Vanessa. However, Prepulsid was treated differently in different countries. The United States, for example, had what is called a “black box warning” on Prepulsid. This label clearly outlines the contraindications and risks that come with taking Prepulsid. The different warnings in Canada and the U.S. were both issued by Johnson & Johnson, despite the drug being the same. This was another shock to Young. The lack of safety concern for Canadian citizens was the main component of Young's lawsuit; he felt as though Health Canada was letting Johnson & Johnson get away with putting Canadians in danger. Fighting this was a huge risk for Young. Most people who tried to sue pharmaceutical companies weren't able to keep up with the legal costs associated with a lawsuit. Big Pharma could provide infinite resources and lawyers against a common citizen who would have to dip into their savings or risk foreclosing on their house. This is how the major pharmaceutical companies were able to hide most of the damage done. The

plaintiff would usually end up settling because they simply couldn't afford a lawsuit, and the pharmaceutical companies would walk away unharmed. Doctors were not immune to the effects of Big Pharma, either. Millions of dollars were invested into marketing to doctors to get them to prescribe whatever drug was new and hot. Detail representatives (sales reps for pharmaceutical companies) would invest in doctors by giving them gifts and sending them on lavish retreats. These reps would attempt to sell the doctors on whatever new drug they were marketing by only discussing the pros of the drug, never talking about any adverse effects.

Young concludes the book with a detailed report of the trial. The judge ruled that Vanessa's death was a result of toxicity from Prepulsid, and the jury had laid out fifty-nine suggestions to improve drug safety in Canada. Despite losing the trial, Johnson & Johnson continued to pour money into Prepulsid. They attempted to market it towards children, even though it was never proven to be effective. It wasn't until five years later, in 2006, that Young finally settled his individual lawsuit with Johnson & Johnson. The lawsuit had exposed all of the dark inner-workings of the drug industry that Young had hoped for. If he had not settled, he would have risked losing his home and having to pay over one million dollars in legal fees.

Along with the lawsuit, Young's book had set out with the intention to expose the pharmaceutical industry, and did so in a gripping manner with a perfect combination of heart and rationale that engages the reader. Anywhere from medical studies to philosophy to just a casual read, this book can find an audience. Young's book tends to be influenced by bias and does not include much information about the positive side of the medical field, but it doesn't need to. It's purpose is clear; it is a book about the darker side of an industry.