

# Dr. Mercola's Attackers Sued for Role in 'Crime of the Century'

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) May 17, 2021

## Story at-a-glance

- Between September 2019 and September 2020 alone, opioid overdoses killed 87,000 Americans — a new record-high
- Various court cases have demonstrated how Purdue Pharma, maker of OxyContin, systematically misled doctors about the drug's addictiveness to drive up sales, resulting in an avalanche of opioid addiction and subsequent deaths
- The Massachusetts attorney general is now suing Purdue's PR firm, Publicis Health, for its role in creating Purdue's deceptive marketing
- Publicis is accused of placing illegal advertisements for OxyContin in the electronic medical records of patients and creating training materials for Purdue sales reps on how to combat doctor's objections to the drugs
- Publicis also developed strategies to counter opioid guidelines issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and created "patient stories" to "humanize" the OxyContin brand and counter negative press about addiction risks

In previous articles, I've discussed the central role false advertising played in the creation of the opioid crisis.<sup>1</sup>

To recap, a single paragraph in a 1980 letter to the editor<sup>2,3</sup> (not a study) in The New England Journal of Medicine — which stated that narcotic addiction in patients with no history of addiction was very rare — became the basis of a [drug marketing](#) campaign that has since led to the death of hundreds of thousands of people, or four times the number of Americans killed in Vietnam.

Between September 2019 and September 2020 alone, opioid overdoses killed a staggering 87,000 Americans — a new record-high.<sup>4</sup>

Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, used this letter to the editor as the basis for its claim that opioid addiction affects fewer than 1% of patients treated with the drugs. In reality, opioids have a very high rate of addiction, have not been proven effective for long-term use<sup>5</sup> and, in fact, fail to control moderate to severe pain any better than over-the-counter pain relievers.<sup>6</sup>

Various court cases have demonstrated how [Purdue systematically misled doctors](#) about OxyContin's addictiveness to drive up sales, resulting in an avalanche of opioid addiction and subsequent deaths.<sup>7</sup>

Unethical to the core, Purdue also cashed in on the addiction trend it manufactured by secretly founding Rhodes Pharma to manufacture generic opioids,<sup>8</sup> and getting into the business of [creating overdose treatments](#).<sup>9,10</sup>

Facing an estimated 2,600 lawsuits<sup>11,12</sup> relating to its role in the opioid epidemic, Purdue filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in September 2019,<sup>13</sup> as a way to avoid litigation losses. Just over a year later they pleaded guilty to three federal criminal charges, including violating a federal anti-kickback law, conspiracy to defraud the U.S. government and violating the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act.<sup>14,15</sup>

The company agreed to pay \$8.3 billion in fines, forfeiture of past profits and civil liability payments to settle the charges,<sup>16</sup> but short on cash — having transferred more than \$10 billion of the company’s funds into family trusts and offshore accounts<sup>17</sup> — the company was dissolved and its remaining assets used to erect a “public benefit company” owned and controlled by the U.S. government.<sup>18</sup> Future earnings will supposedly be used to combat the opioid crisis.

## **Purdue’s PR Company Sued for Deceptive Marketing**

While Purdue’s owners, the Sackler family, got off scot-free, states struggling with the exorbitant cost of opioid addiction aren’t ready to bury the hatchet just yet. Instead, some are going after the PR firm Purdue hired to run their deceptive marketing campaigns.

As it turns out, that PR firm is none other than Publicis, a partner of the World Economic Forum, which is leading the call for a Great Reset. As detailed in “[The Web of Players Trying to Silence Truth](#),” Publicis appears to be coordinating the global effort to suppress information that runs counter to the technocratic narrative about COVID-19, its origin, prevention and treatment — suppression and censorship that has been repeatedly aimed at this website specifically.

At the beginning of May 2021, the Massachusetts attorney general filed a lawsuit<sup>19</sup> against Publicis Health, accusing the Publicis subsidiary of helping Purdue create the deceptive marketing materials used to mislead doctors into prescribing OxyContin.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup> As reported by Yahoo! News:<sup>24</sup>

*“The lawsuit alleges that Publicis ‘engaged in myriad unfair and deceptive strategies that influenced OxyContin prescribing across the nation,’ a statement by Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey’s office said. Those strategies were carried out through dozens of contracts between 2010 and 2019, worth more than \$50 million ...*

*Tactics included combatting doctors’ ‘hesitancy’ to prescribe the medication, and persuading them to prescribe OxyContin over lower-dose, short-acting opioids, thus increasing the risk of addiction. Massachusetts is asking that Publicis Health pay ‘compensatory damages’ of an unspecified amount for having ‘created a public nuisance.’”*

## **Publicis Knowingly Promoted Over-Prescription**

Publicis Health argues that its work for Purdue was entirely lawful and limited to “implementing Purdue’s advertising plan and buying media space.” Publicis also claims the specific activities listed in the lawsuit fall outside the statute of limitations.

Some of those activities included placing illegal advertisements for OxyContin in the electronic medical records of patients, creating training materials for Purdue sales reps on how to combat doctor’s objections to the drugs, developing strategies to counter opioid guidelines issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and creating

“patient stories” to “humanize” the OxyContin brand and counter negative press about addiction risks.<sup>25,26</sup>

According to the lawsuit, one patient vignette featured a 40-year-old man who had his dose increased from 10 milligrams a day to 20 mg in just three weeks. It also claims Publicis was responsible for creating and sending thousands of deceptive emails to doctors, encouraging them to not only increase patients’ dosages but also to prescribe the drug to patients who were already on less dangerous pain meds.<sup>27</sup>

By design, Publicis’s schemes worked to counter public health measures intended to reduce unnecessary opioid use, because more opioid use generated more profits for Publicis’s opioid clients.

Publicis also instructed Purdue to target doctors who were already writing out dangerously high numbers of prescriptions, even in the midst of a raging opioid epidemic,<sup>28</sup> all while agency executives gleefully discussed the record fees they’d collect from the Purdue account. A March 2016 email exchange reveals the Publicis subsidiary was expecting to make up to \$12.28 million from Purdue that year alone.

## **Publicis Also Represented Addiction Center**

According to the complaint:<sup>29</sup>

*“Publicis helped create a public nuisance of opioid use disorder, overdose, and death. By design, Publicis’s schemes worked to counter public health measures intended to reduce unnecessary opioid use, because more opioid use generated more profits for Publicis’s opioid clients.”*

Like Purdue, Publicis also cashed in on the [opioid addiction](#) it helped create by pitching its services to organizations working to end addiction. As reported by Forbes,<sup>30</sup> the agency “won the account to work on drugfree.org after touting how it’s been ‘immersed in the evolving national opioid medication dialogue going on between pharma companies, the government and FDA, and the public via inside access as a trusted and informed consulting partner.’”

In an interview cited by Courthouse News, Amanda Pustilnik, a senior fellow on law and applied neuroscience at Harvard Law School who also teaches at the Center for Law, Brain & Behavior at Massachusetts General Hospital, noted that:<sup>31</sup>

*“The story of the opioid epidemic is often misrepresented as a story of irresponsible patients and over-prescribing doctors. This prosecution gets at the heart of the matter.*

*Patients and doctors were not, on average, irresponsible. They acted under the influence of a concerted plan of misinformation and over-promotion orchestrated up and down the supply chain for these medications.”*

## **Publicis Admits Role in Censorship Push**

As mentioned earlier, Publicis appears to be playing an important role in the global censorship of information relating to COVID-19, and Publicis Health admitted its involvement in this agenda as recently as April 27, 2021. In a tweet,<sup>32</sup> the agency announced its partnership with NewsGuard, “to fight the ‘infodemic’ of misinformation about COVID-19 and its vaccines.”

In short, Publicis Health is dedicated to suppressing any information that hurts its Big Pharma clients, which include Lilly, Abbot, Roche, Amgen, Genentech, Celgene, Gilead, Biogen, AstraZeneca, Sanofi, GlaxoSmithKline and Bayer, just to name a few.

Publicis is more than a partner with NewsGuard, however. NewsGuard actually received a large chunk of its startup capital from Publicis, as detailed in "[New Thought Police NewsGuard Is Owned by Big Pharma](#)." NewsGuard, a self-proclaimed arbiter of truth, rates websites on criteria of "credibility" and "transparency," ostensibly to guide viewers to the most reliable sources of news and information.

In reality, however, NewsGuard ends up acting as a gate keeper with a mission to barricade unpopular truth and differences of opinion behind closed gates. Its clearly biased ranking system easily dissuades people from perusing information from low-rated sites, mine included.

## **Extensive Propaganda Network Works Against the Public**

As detailed in "The Web of Players Trying to Silence Truth" (hyperlinked above), Publicis is part of an enormous network that includes international drug companies, fact checkers and credibility raters like NewsGuard, Google and other search engines, Microsoft, antivirus software companies like Trend Micro, public libraries, schools, the banking industry, the U.S. State Department and Department of Defense, the World Health Organization and the World Economic Forum.

Mind you, this is not a comprehensive review of links. It's merely a sampling of entities to give you an idea of the breadth of connections, which when taken together explain how certain views — such as information about COVID-19 and vaccines — can be so effectively erased.

To understand the power that PR companies such as Publicis wield, you also need to realize that PR has, by and large, replaced the free press. In decades past, pro-industry advertising stood in stark contrast to the free press, which would frequently expose problems with products and industries, thereby serving as a counterbalance to industry propaganda.

When a free press with honest reporting based on verifiable facts actually does its job, ineffective or toxic products are driven off the market. All of this changed in the late 20th century, when media outlets started relying on advertisers for the bulk of their revenues.

As intended, journalists quickly came under the control of advertisers, who suddenly had the power to kill stories they didn't like. Today, news organizations simply won't run reports that might harm the bottom line of its advertisers and, not surprisingly, the drug industry is among the top-paying advertisers.

By further partnering with the "big guns" of media — such as the Paley Center for Media, which is composed of every major media in the world<sup>33</sup> — Publicis and its industry clients have been able to influence and control the press to virtually eliminate your ability to get the truth on many important issues, including COVID-19.

Seeing how Publicis represents most of the major pharmaceutical companies in the world and funded the creation of NewsGuard, it's not far-fetched to assume Publicis might influence NewsGuard's ratings of drug industry competitors, such as alternative health sites. Being a

Google partner,<sup>34,35</sup> Publicis also has unprecedented ability to simply bury undesirable views that might hurt its clientele.

NewsGuard's health-related service, HealthGuard,<sup>36</sup> is also partnered with the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) — a progressive U.K.-based cancel-culture leader<sup>37</sup> with extensive ties to government and global think tanks that has labeled people questioning the COVID-19 vaccine as “threats to national security.”

The CCDH has also published a [hit-list of 12 groups and individuals it wants Big Tech to bury, deplatform and ban](#) for disseminating COVID-19 information that runs counter to status quo propaganda. Not surprisingly, Mercola.com is on that list, and a ramp-up of personal threats that cannot be defended against in a court of law recently forced me to delete many of the articles discussing alternative treatments for COVID-19 from my website.

## **The Crime of the Century**

If you get the chance, I recommend watching Alex Gibney's HBO documentary “The Crime of the Century,” which details how the [opioid epidemic](#) was manufactured. In a Wall Street Journal television review, John Anderson writes, in part:<sup>38</sup>

*“In Mr. Gibney's two-part ‘Crime of the Century’ ... the cinema is as exhilarating as the journalism is exhaustive. Still, the style remains in service to the story: how big pharma lied and bribed its way into billions of dollars while leaving death and devastation behind, through a seemingly conscience-free crusade to sell stronger and stronger opiates to more and more people.*

*It's a success story, from the industry's point of view. It's also a story of villainy, with a catalog of villains — not just the Sackler family of Purdue Pharma, but their sales representatives; the U.S. congressmen to whom they made outsize donations ... former prosecutors hired as lobbyists ... and officials of the Justice Department and the Food and Drug Administration ...*

*‘The business of criminal cartels and pharmaceutical companies are connected,’ Mr. Gibney says in voiceover — the very obvious example being the drift to heroin by addicts thwarted by the increased expense and reduced availability of opioids. The director then goes about establishing how and why that is so.*

*The default argument of Purdue Pharma and its defenders is that drug users, not drug makers, are responsible for addiction. But as the miniseries points out, the information that was fed to doctors and on which patients based the use of prescriptions — including the claim that delayed-action OxyContin wasn't addictive — was simply untrue.”*

## **Unethical Behavior Is Par for the Course**

While Publicis is trying to downplay its role in what has been described as the crime of the century, the lawsuit against it will hopefully result in a reevaluation of marketing ethics. The agency, knowing full well there was an epidemic of opioid abuse underway, resulting in tens of thousands of premature deaths each year, took on the job of increasing Purdue's profits by making that lethal trend worse.

Publicis claims they were just doing what advertising agencies do — they created promotional materials that boost client revenue. However, this argument circumvents any notion of ethics and concern about public health. They're basically admitting that it's all about making money, regardless of the cost.

So, even if their actions were within legal limits (which the Massachusetts case will eventually establish), their actions were immoral and clearly undermined public health.

They now want you to believe they are protecting public health by supporting COVID-19 censorship, but this too is working against the public good. How can you possibly make an educated decision about whether or not to participate in this gene therapy experiment if you're not allowed to hear anything about the risks?

What Publicis calls "misinformation" is simply information that contradicts the propaganda being put out by the hands that feed it, i.e., the drug industry. History tells us companies driven by profit interest make poor truth tellers, as negative information will clearly have a detrimental impact on their bottom line. So, they lie and obfuscate. It's that simple.

Public relations firms like Publicis are mere arms of these notoriously untruthful industries. They do their bidding because that's what they're paid to do. To think that Big Pharma and paid propagandists are looking out for anyone but themselves is dangerously naïve.

It is ironic doublespeak that Publicis claims to defend against misinformation that puts the public at risk, while being clearly guilty of crimes against humanity, having played a crucial role in one of the deadliest health care schemes involving lies and deceit.

- Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [The Atlantic June 2, 2017](#)

<sup>2</sup> [NEJM 1980; 302\(2\): 123 \(PDF\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [STAT News May 31, 2017](#)

<sup>4, 24</sup> [Yahoo News May 6, 2021](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Medscape September 28, 2015](#)

<sup>6</sup> [JAMA March 6, 2018;319\(9\):872-882](#)

<sup>7</sup> [CDC Drug Overdose Deaths](#)

<sup>8</sup> [New York Post, September 11, 2018](#)

<sup>9</sup> [STAT News September 7, 2018](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Superior Court Case Number 1884-cv-01808 \(BLS2\)](#)

<sup>11, 13</sup> [BBC News September 16, 2019](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Reuters March 26, 2019](#)

- <sup>14, 17</sup> [CNN October 21, 2020](#)
- <sup>15</sup> [Reuters October 21, 2020](#)
- <sup>16</sup> [STAT News October 21, 2020](#)
- <sup>18</sup> [Associated Press October 21, 2020](#)
- <sup>19, 29</sup> [Commonwealth of Massachusetts Superior Court Complaint CA No. 21-1055 \(PDF\)](#)
- <sup>20, 26, 27, 28</sup> [Boston Globe May 8, 2021](#)
- <sup>21, 25, 30</sup> [Forbes May 7, 2021](#)
- <sup>22</sup> [CommonHealth May 7, 2021](#)
- <sup>23, 31</sup> [Courthouse News May 6, 2021](#)
- <sup>32</sup> [Twitter Publicis Health Media April 27, 2021](#)
- <sup>33</sup> [The Paley Center for Media 2018 Agenda](#)
- <sup>34</sup> [Ad Week September 22, 2008](#)
- <sup>35</sup> [Google Marketing Platform Partners, Publicis Sapient](#)
- <sup>36</sup> [NewsGuard HealthGuard](#)
- <sup>37</sup> [Off-Guardian August 11, 2020](#)
- <sup>38</sup> [Wall Street Journal May 6, 2021 \(Archived\)](#)