



The opioid crisis in the United States was fuelled by the pharmaceutical industry

By Marcela Del Muro and Marcos Vizcarra

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In March 2019, more than 500 US cities, counties and Native American tribes filed a lawsuit against eight members of the Sackler family, owners of the pharmaceutical giant Purdue Pharma. 'This nation is facing an unprecedented opioid addiction epidemic that was initiated and perpetuated by the Sackler defendants for their own financial gain,' the complaint stated.

Purdue Pharma's commercial breakthrough came in 1996 with the release of OxyContin, an opioid-based painkiller. Its launch was backed by an aggressive marketing campaign designed to persuade doctors to prescribe the drug, without warning them of its high addictive potential. Within just five years, OxyContin sales had skyrocketed to US\$1.6 billion.

The company's legal troubles began in 2007, when Purdue pleaded guilty to misleading the public about OxyContin's addiction risks and paid a US\$600 million fine. Yet the case did little to slow prescriptions or bring tighter oversight from US health authorities. In fact, sales only grew, reaching US\$3 billion by 2010, cementing the Sacklers as one of the US's wealthiest families.

Academic research later revealed the scale of industry influence. According to the studies, between August 2013 and December 2015, pharmaceutical companies – including Purdue – paid US\$39.7 million to nearly 68 000 doctors to promote opioid prescriptions. Such payments are legal in the US, although regulated by the health authorities. 'We now know that the aggressive marketing strategies employed by Purdue Pharma (and other companies) to encourage the treatment of chronic pain with prescription opioids, along with tactics that downplayed addiction risks, were a key driver of the current crisis,' one researcher told the BBC.



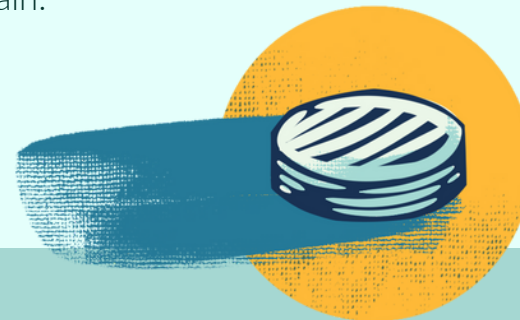
By 2016, the toll was staggering: more than 42 000 opioid-related overdose deaths that year, making up 66.4% of all overdose fatalities. Reports were already documenting rising heroin use and the spread of illicit fentanyl, but OxyContin addiction alone had devastated countless families and fuelled the public health emergency.

The lawsuits kept piling up – nearly 3 000 in total – until 2019, when Purdue Pharma and the Sacklers were formally indicted. That same year, the company filed for bankruptcy. In October 2020, Purdue pleaded guilty to producing and distributing opioids, and reached a civil settlement that was meant to close the case. But the bankruptcy process complicated both the resolution and compensation for victims.

Finally, in early 2025, Purdue and the Sacklers agreed to pay US\$7.4 billion in damages to states, counties, Native American tribes and individuals who had sued. While the family pleaded

guilty twice, they continued to deny acting with malice, although they did agree to permanently stop producing opioids.

The settlement is seen by many as a victory. Still, experts warn that the opioid crisis cannot be pinned solely on the pharmaceutical industry. The structural problems that make people more vulnerable to addiction, such as gaps in public health and mental health systems, remain unresolved. As historian David Herzberg, a specialist in addictive drugs, noted: '[T]he crisis isn't an aberration caused by the individual misdeeds of bad actors.[...] Making business leaders pay to repair the harms they caused surely helps. Yet broad reforms are also needed to prevent similar disasters from happening again.'





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