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This is the first of a two-part article.

My brother's child Katherine, "Kitty," killed herself at twenty-two. Though three times in detox, she'd been unable to shake the addiction and related problems that haunted her. In a gesture of vengeful spite, she hanged herself in her boyfriend's apartment after he told her he couldn't afford the expensive birthday gift she demanded of him.

"It's not your fault," I tried to tell him at the memorial service. "Kitty's problems—our family problems—go way back. Kitty's dad was eight when our mother died."

The young man was so distraught, I'm not sure he heard me.

"The girl got into her mother's purse late at night and took whatever prescription drugs were there," Kitty's mother's boyfriend told me. "If there were none, she'd grab some cash and get the drugs she wanted on the street. Her mother pretended not to notice."

The year was 2002, and the first wave of the prescription-opium crisis was in full blast, with OxyContin its root cause. OxyContin, a morphine-based painkiller produced by Purdue Pharma, was addicting and killing right and left, no thanks to owners/producers, the Sacklers, and their aggressive and misleading advertising tactics.

The Sackler dynasty was founded by three physician brothers, offspring of struggling immigrants. Arthur, the eldest, born in 1913, in high school developed such a knack for advertising and selling, it enabled him to get through medical school, even financing his brothers' aspirations.

Arthur Sackler joined McAdams, an advertising agency he eventually owned. He began writing ads for the Swiss-owned pharmaceutical company Roche, promoting its brainchild, Librium, as a wonder drug for ailments ranging from depression to anxiety. The drug had passed clinical trials, and the company wanted to market it to the masses, yet federal regulations forbade pharmaceutical companies to advertise directly to consumers. Arthur changed this by unleashing his drug advertising campaigns, which touted the benefits of pain medication that soon included Roche's Valium.

Valium, Arthur asserted, had no adverse side effects. This was a baldfaced lie that hoodwinked the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) into approval and physicians into over-prescribing. Not long after FDA approval, patients showed up at hospitals hopelessly addicted. The federal government began to investigate in 1965. More than a dozen years later, former First Lady Betty Ford acknowledged struggling with Valium addiction.

By the time the FDA forced tranquilizers to become controlled substances, “Valium had become part of the lives of some twenty million Americans, the most widely consumed—and most widely abused—prescription drug in the world,” writes Patrick Radden Keefe in his 2021 *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*.

When, in 1952, Arthur acquired the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma, he planned to develop Sackler products. In the meantime he concocted ads for Pfizer for its antibiotic Terramycin with an unprecedented media blitz via McAdams, devising slick advertisements, some to target physicians, others as inserts in newspapers that, at first glance, appeared to be editorials. Arthur even secured the cooperation of Henry Welch, the czar at the FDA. Pfizer introduced the drug Sigmamycin at a medical conference where Dr. Welch spoke, endorsing the drug. Pfizer increased its sales force from eight to three hundred; eventually the company employed two thousand hawking the product.

Already Arthur Sackler had gone from marketing to misleading. One advertisement displayed the business cards of eight physicians who supposedly endorsed the drug, implying they had completed clinical trials, along with the legend, “More and More Physicians Find Sigmamycin the Antibiotic Therapy of Choice.” The cards were fake, with made-up addresses and phone numbers.

An article blasting the fraudulent advertising appeared in *The Saturday Review* and a congressional investigation followed. Welch was forced to resign in disgrace, though he kept his pension and retired to Florida. Arthur Sackler, unlike the Pfizer execs, agreed to testify before the committee. He had retained a high-stakes attorney who negotiated a limited time for questioning his client. The senators never got to ask the questions they had prepared, which would have brought to light incriminating evidence. Arthur talked nonstop and walked away unscathed.

By then the Sackler empire was completely integrated, its interests everywhere. Arthur conducted their business via McAdams, his brother Raymond was Purdue’s president, and their bother Mortimer ran the European arm of the company. In 1972 Raymond’s son Richard, having attained his MD degree, joined his dad as Assistant to the President.

MS Contin, a timed-release morphine painkiller marketed to cancer patients, was sold in Europe by the Sackler company Napp, but in 1984, Purdue released MS Contin in the U.S. This drug was meant only for cancer patients on the deathbed, who would no longer need to go to a hospital for infusions but could take the drug orally at home, but now, Purdue Pharma via the Sacklers targeted American doctors and pharmacists. By 1995, the Sacklers had graduated to OxyContin, which Richard researched and developed at Purdue Pharma. Like MS Contin, OxyContin is an opioid consisting primarily of morphine; however, the latter is vastly more powerful than the former. The Sacklers began by increasing their sales force to 700, and “Sell, Sell, Sell” was the mantra with which they plied their sales reps during a gala event in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1996.

“Ask your doctor about . . .” The line is used even today in direct marketing to consumers. No other country in the world (the exception is New Zealand) permits pharmaceutical companies to appeal directly to consumers, but in the US, it’s runaway-capitalist “business as usual.”

The FDA had formally approved the drug just prior to the sales fest in Phoenix, where Richard predicted, “The launch of OxyContin will be followed by a prescription blizzard that will bury the competition.” Stepping into Uncle Arthur’s footsteps, who died in 1987, Richard popularized the drug for people suffering from a variety of acute pain syndromes. A coating around the pill was meant to dissolve the drug slowly enough to avoid addiction, but people soon figured out how to peel off the coating and crush the pill for snorting or injecting.

The ads had billed OxyContin as the pill “to start with and stay with.” That’s just what happened: Patients became hopelessly addicted, and the U.S. experienced an opioid epidemic out of all proportions. Even Rush Limbaugh admitted getting dependent on the drug, which had devolved into a street drug openly discussed in online forums as “heroin in a pill” and “hillbilly heroin.”

People were dying by the hundreds; morgues were inundated with corpses; patients fell deathly ill with withdrawal symptoms and had to be hospitalized—but the drug made the Sacklers fabulously wealthy. Soon competitor drug companies adopted the Sackler approach to advertising.

By 2002, the Sackler lawyer Howard Udell announced that Purdue had spent \$45 million to fight off law suits. The family gave him carte blanche to spend whatever it took to win; soon he was spending \$3 million a month on litigation. Udell had eighteen in-house lawyers at his disposal but he also hired top-gun law offices to fend off litigators. Predictably, lawsuit after lawsuit was withdrawn. “We haven’t paid a penny so far and we intend to do so in future,” bragged Udell.

While politicians busied themselves with a “War on Drugs” that concentrated on people of color, Purdue Pharma behaved like a legal drug cartel, unleashing wave after wave of opiates on America. They made ungodly amounts of money selling a highly addictive product under the false premise it’s not addictive—and selling it in bigger and bigger concentrations, from the original 10 milligram up to 80 milligram per tablet. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies behaved like street-corner drug dealers, except that the drug they pumped into Americans was legal, writes Keefe.

Here ends the first part of this article. More later.