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When Medication Becomes Mandatory: Pharma Firm Lobbying Judges To Put Opioid Addicts On \$1,000 A Shot Injection Programs

By [PAUL ANTHONY TAYLOR](#)

With the United States caught in the asphyxiating grip of an opioid addiction epidemic that is [expected](#) to kill over 60 thousand Americans this year, evidence is growing that the pharma industry is seeking to maximize its profiteering from the situation. According to a disturbing report from [ProPublica](#), the biopharmaceutical company Alkermes has been marketing its \$1,000 a shot opioid addiction injection, Vivitrol, directly to judges. As a result, by presenting opioid addicts with the stark choice of either going to jail or joining an injection program, drug courts have helped annual sales of Vivitrol rise by almost 700 percent since 2011, reaching a total of \$209 million in 2016.

Fueled by the rise of prescription drugs such as fentanyl, a synthetic opioid painkiller that is 50 to 100 times more powerful than morphine, as well as its deadly analogues such as carfentanil, a chemical so lethal in miniscule amounts that it is said to present a [potential terrorism threat](#), drug overdose deaths are now occurring at an average of one every ten minutes in the United States. Accordingly, with over 2 million Americans estimated to be dependent on opioids, switching a user's dependency from one drug to another is seen by the pharma industry as a highly profitable business opportunity. Alkermes projects that income from Vivitrol injections will reach \$800 million by 2020, with some estimates suggesting the drug could be worth as much as \$1 billion a year by 2021.

Fighting back against pharma dependency

With concern growing over the escalating rates of opioid addiction and overdoses, and the death toll continuing to mount, American states are fighting back by suing pharma companies. The latest to join the battle is South Carolina, which recently [announced](#) it is suing the OxyContin maker Purdue for unfair and deceptive marketing of opioid painkillers. Reuters reports that Purdue and other pharma companies have already been the object of opioid-related lawsuits in Oklahoma, Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri and New Hampshire, as well as cities and counties in California, Illinois, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee and New York.

There seems little doubt that more suits will follow. In the state of Connecticut, the town of Tolland is [reported](#) to be examining the possibility of joining a suit the city of Waterbury plans to file. In all, a total of 10 towns in the Connecticut area are believed to be considering getting involved. A New York law firm is said to be willing to represent the municipalities for free.



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Who will pharma target next?

Given that Alkermes apparently doesn't see anything wrong with targeting the criminal justice system and lobbying judges as a means of increasing its profits, one can only but wonder what the pharma industry might try next.

Might it lobby insurance companies to put pressure on patients with [heart disease](#) to take [statin drugs](#), at threat of having their health or life insurance policies revoked? Could it push for [cancer](#) patients to lose their insurance if they refuse to have [chemotherapy](#)? Before you dismiss these scenarios as outlandish, keep in mind that in some situations pharmaceutical drug treatments can already be enforced



against an individual's will. Examples include children and young By Kiwiev ([Own work](#)) [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons people diagnosed with cancer or other serious diseases; patients deemed to be suffering from mental illness; and people judged to be incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions or decisions. Clearly, if Alkermes has stooped to lobbying the criminal justice system for profit, we have to assume the pharma industry is capable of lobbying almost anyone for almost anything.

Ultimately, however, whatever tactics the pharma industry employs, one thing is now certain: by earning themselves billions of dollars from marketing heavily addictive narcotic painkillers while pretending they were safe for long-term use, drug companies have demonstrated that they are morally bankrupt and ruthlessly driven by profit. So while suing the pharma industry for the damage caused by opioids is an important step, the long-term goal has to be replacing synthetic drug-based medicine with a preventive system of healthcare based on [scientifically proven natural approaches](#). For until this is achieved, human health will continue to be held to ransom by the 'business with disease'.

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