

# Opioid maker changes tack as scrutiny mounts

February 14 2018, by Jean-Louis Doublet

---



This undated handout photo from the US Drug Enforcement Administration(DEA) shows 20 mg pills of OxyContin—the drug produced by Purdue Pharma

Accused of profiting from a deadly opioid crisis ravaging middle class America, the maker of the world's best-selling pain medication, Purdue

Pharma, said Tuesday it is changing tack in the face of increasing scrutiny.

The privately-held firm, which made the fortune of the Sackler family of philanthropists, confirmed that it has asked its salespeople not to encourage doctors to prescribe the anti-pain medications, including the popular OxyContin, which are often abused by addicts.

"We have restructured and significantly reduced our commercial operation & our sales representatives will no longer promote opioids to prescribers," Purdue Pharma said.

Oversubscription of pain medications has led to dependence by millions of Americans and an explosion of fatal overdoses, including those of pop icon Prince and rocker Tom Petty.

Purdue Pharma is among manufacturers named by New York City in a \$500 million lawsuit filed in January to recoup costs that could help battle the escalating opioid crisis.

The deadly toll from overdoses in New York doubled between 2010 and 2016, when more than 1,000 people died from opioid excess. More New Yorkers died from opioid overdoses than from car accidents and homicides combined, the suit claims.

The lawsuit, like hundreds of others, accuses manufacturers of deceptive marketing and distributors of over-supplying prescription painkillers, burdening the city with increased health care, criminal justice and law enforcement costs.

In October, President Donald Trump described the opioid crisis as a national public health emergency.

An estimated 2.4 million Americans are addicted to opiates, the narcotics that include [prescription painkillers](#), as well as heroin.



The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington is one of many bearing the name of the family that founded opioid maker Purdue Pharma

## **Family dynasty**

Brothers Mortimer and Raymond Sackler founded Purdue Pharma.

Another brother, Arthur, had a sizable stake.

All three are dead but the family name—synonymous with generous donations to the art world—lives on at multiple museums in the United States, in London and in Paris at the Louvre.

Other Sackler family members still sit, quietly, on Purdue Pharma's board of directors.

In October, The New Yorker magazine said that OxyContin had generated \$35 billion for Purdue Pharma since hitting the market in 1995, a large part of which went to the Sacklers.

But the family remains discrete about its links with Purdue Pharma. The group's website does not identify the family members who serve on the company's board.

## **'Morally abhorrent'**

In January, American photographer Nan Goldin began a public campaign about the link between opioids and the wealthy philanthropists.

Golden, a former opioid addict, formed the group PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) and launched the hashtag #ShameonSackler.

The aim is to push Purdue Pharma and the Sacklers to finance programs for treatment and prevention, to limit prescriptions for opioids and to publicize their dangers.





Photographer Nan Goldin, a former opioid addict pictured in 2009, wants museums to refuse funding from the Sackler family, whose members sit on the board of OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma

Goldin also called on museums and universities that benefited from the Sacklers' largesse to refuse future donations.

Paradoxically, her crusade received support from Elizabeth Sackler, a daughter of Arthur, who told American media that "the [opioid epidemic](#) is a national crisis and Purdue Pharma's role in it is morally abhorrent to me."

She underlined that her father, who died in 1987, played no role in the development and commercialization of OxyContin, and that his stake in

Purdue Pharma was sold to his brothers before the drug was put on the market.

"None of his descendants have ever owned a share of Purdue stock nor benefited in any way from it or the sale of OxyContin," she said.

Arthur Sackler's widow Jillian also sought to put distance between her husband and the controversial drug.

"None of the charitable donations made by Arthur prior to his death, nor that I made on his behalf after his death, were funded by the production, distribution or sale of OxyContin or other revenue from Purdue Pharma. Period," she said in a statement to AFP.

"Passing judgment on Arthur's life's work through the lens of the opioid crisis some 30 years after his death is a gross injustice."

## **'Part of the solution'**

Purdue Pharma posted on its website a warning about the effects of opioids and said it is committed "to being part of the solution by partnering with local law enforcement, state and local government agencies, and community groups across the country."

But, according to a report made public Monday by Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill, Purdue Pharma financially supported the Washington Legal Foundation, a group that in 2016 criticized recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention aimed at limiting the prescription of opioids for cases of chronic pain.

The report lists a long series of medical associations specialized in the treatment of pain that Purdue Pharma and other opioid producers have helped financially.

"Organizations receiving substantial funding from manufacturers have, in fact, amplified and reinforced messages favoring increased [opioid](#) use," McCaskill said.

© 2018 AFP

Citation: Opioid maker changes tack as scrutiny mounts (2018, February 14) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-02-opioid-maker-tack-scrutiny-mounts.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.