

Drug Research - How It's Manipulated

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If you think drug research is honest, you need to read this.
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We would like to think that the research done by the pharmaceutical companies is honest, but more than one news story has shown otherwise. If we had the political will, or if the FDA was less political, drug trials could be made more honest almost immediately with one simple procedure. Unfortunately, that change has been fought by the drug companies. Let's see why.

The English newspaper, The Guardian, recently reported on several systematic reviews of drug research. They clearly showed that pharmaceutical industry studies and clinical trials report positive results far more often than those funded independently (funded by those not selling the drugs tested). Is it just a coincidence that drug companies get more of the results that they're looking for? No.

{bot_wrgoogle}The drug companies probably almost never directly tamper with clinical drug trials, nor are they likely to change the reported results afterwards. Dishonesty or criminal behavior like that is probably very rare in drug research, because it isn't needed. More subtle ways are available.

How To Manipulate Drug Research Results

The most common way to manipulate the results of drug research, is the simplest of all. If you want to show that a new pharmaceutical works, just get rid of the trials that show it doesn't, and keep the ones that show some effect. Investigations have demonstrated that this is common, that negative data is often hidden or discarded.

Suppose a new drug is given to twelve groups of people who share a given disease. It appears to help the people in four of the groups, but the subjects in the other eight groups have no improvement or perhaps even get sicker or have serious side effects. Differing results from one trial to the next is common, since people get better or worse for many reasons. This is why many trials are necessary to be statistically significant.

What if in this case, the company decided that only the four trials with positive results are important, and they quietly get rid of the data from the other eight. Suddenly a drug with no real benefit appears to have helped in every clinical trial - at least every one we'll know about. It is very bad science, of course, but one of the most common ways pharmaceutical companies manipulate drug research results.

How do we stop this? Researchers have been recommending an inexpensive solution to this problem for decades: make the companies register all trials, so none can be "lost." To use the results of any drug research to get a new pharmaceutical approved, a company would have to register the trial before it begins, in a compulsory international trials registry. It would add very little to their costs.

Naturally the drug companies are against this simple idea, and certainly have their arguments to present. The most likely real reason they are fighting it is that it doesn't allow them as much control over the "truth" or the results of drug research. And with our own FDA staffed by their friends and former coworkers, we can expect this dishonesty to go on.

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