

OxyContin goes global — “We’re only just getting started”

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OxyContin is a dying business in America.

With the nation in the grip of an opioid epidemic that has claimed more than 200,000 lives, the U.S. medical establishment is turning away from painkillers. Top health officials are discouraging primary care doctors from prescribing them for chronic pain, saying there is no proof they work long-term and substantial evidence they put patients at risk.

Prescriptions for OxyContin have fallen nearly 40% since 2010, meaning billions in lost revenue for its Connecticut manufacturer, Purdue Pharma.

So the company's owners, the Sackler family, are pursuing a new strategy: Put the painkiller that set off the U.S. opioid crisis into medicine cabinets around the world.

A network of international companies owned by the family is moving rapidly into Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and other regions, and pushing for broad use of painkillers in places ill-prepared to deal with the ravages of opioid abuse and addiction.

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[Mundipharma China](#)

[Mundipharma is courting Chinese patients with a campaign encouraging people to take medications as their physicians prescribe.](#)



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In this global drive, the companies, known as Mundipharma, are using some of the same controversial marketing practices that made OxyContin a pharmaceutical blockbuster in the U.S.

In Brazil, China and elsewhere, the companies are running training seminars where doctors are urged to overcome “opiophobia” and prescribe painkillers. They are sponsoring public awareness campaigns that encourage people to seek medical treatment for chronic pain. They are even offering patient discounts to make prescription opioids more affordable.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy said he would advise his peers abroad “to be very careful” with opioid medications and to learn from American “missteps.”

“I would urge them to be very cautious about the marketing of these medications.” — Vivek H. Murthy, U.S. Surgeon General



Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy has called on U.S. doctors to help end the opioid epidemic. (Charles Dharapak / AP)

“I would urge them to be very cautious about the marketing of these medications,” he said in an interview. “Now, in retrospect, we realize that for many the benefits did not outweigh the risks.”

Former U.S. Food and Drug Administration commissioner David A. Kessler

has called the failure to recognize the dangers of painkillers one of the biggest mistakes in modern medicine. Speaking of Mundipharma's push into foreign markets, he said, "It's right out of the playbook of Big Tobacco. As the United States takes steps to limit sales here, the company goes abroad."

"It's right out of the playbook of Big Tobacco." — David A. Kessler, former commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration



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