

Johnson & Johnson Faces Multibillion Lawsuit from Oklahoma for Alleged Role in Opioid Crisis

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Oklahoma is holding drug giant Johnson & Johnson responsible for its alleged role in spreading the opioid epidemic. The pharmaceutical giant is best known for baby powder and Band-Aid is now facing a multimillion-dollar lawsuit from the state.

As the lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson has unfolded over the past month, the company has struggled to explain marketing strategies its accusers say dangerously misrepresented the risk of opioid addiction to doctors, manipulated medical research, and helped spread the opioid crisis.

So far the opioid epidemic has claimed around 400,000 lives over the past two decades. Over 130 Americans die every day to opioid-related overdose.

Oklahoma?s attorney general, Mike Hunter, is suing Johnson & Johnson for billions of dollars for its alleged part in driving addiction and overdoses in his state in the first full trial of a drug maker over the opioid crisis.

The attorney general has also put the wider industry in the dock by laying out how opioid manufacturers worked together to drive up sales by using their resources to influence medical policy, as well as doctor prescribing. Hunter said the strategy was motivated by the industry?s ?greed? as profits surged.

In one missive, a sales representative dismissed a doctor?s fears that patients might get addicted to the company?s opioid painkillers, telling them that those who didn?t die probably wouldn?t get hooked. Another proposes that targeting sales of the powerfully addictive drugs at those most at risk: men under 40 years old. Click the link to see San Diego's top rehab placement programs.

The lawsuit further alleges that Johnson & Johnson profited further as demand for opioids surged by buying poppy growing companies in Australia to supply the raw narcotic for its own medicines and other American drug makers.

Dr. Andrew Kolodny, who is an expert witness at the forefront of combating the epidemic, told the court he had little idea about Johnson & Johnson?s role until he saw the evidence in the case. ?I think it?s fair to characterize Johnson & Johnson as a kingpin in our opioid crisis,? he said.

The case is now being watched closely by a host of opioid makers, pharmacy chains, and drug distributors, with more than 2,000 lawsuits by communities across the country to see if a court is prepared to hold pharmaceutical firms responsible. The current opioid crisis is now being considered the worst drug epidemic in the history of the United States.

Hunter accuses Johnson & Johnson of joining with other companies to create a narrative of an epidemic of untreated pain in the US to which opioids were the solution. They allegedly did this in part by funding front organizations such as the American Pain Society. The strategy helped drive an increase in opioid prescriptions. Narcotic painkillers then ballooned into a multibillion-dollar-a-year market.

Hunter took 35 boxes containing thousands of subpoenaed ?call notes? to the court. These call notes are sales reps reports on their meetings with doctors, which Hunter claimed showed Johnson & Johnson was more interested in increasing demand for its drug than seeing it properly prescribed.

Johnson & Johnson hired the consultants McKinsey & Company to identify opportunities to sell more of their opioid painkillers. McKinsey then recommended sales reps focus on doctors already prescribing large amounts of OxyContin. The company also proposed a strategy to keep patients on Duragesic even if they had an ?adverse event?.

A broader push aimed to get as many patients as possible off of lower strength opioids and on to Johnson & Johnson?s more powerful drugs. Sales of Duragesic surged past $1 billion a year. Kimberly

Deem-Eshleman, senior Johnson & Johnson marketing executive, defended the sales strategy as reps ?educating? doctors.

Johnson & Johnson strongly denies that it bears responsibility for the opioid epidemic. The company?s defense is focused on the claim that the company was distributing drugs approved by federal agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration, and that it sold a relatively small amount of opioids in Oklahoma that cannot be tied to any specific overdoses.

Dr. Ruseel Portenoy, a pain specialist and influential early supporter for the wide prescribing of opioids, was a paid adviser to Johnson & Johnson, Purdue Pharma, and other drug makers. Some of the most damning testimony against Johnson & Johnson is now coming from Portenoy, who told the court that painkiller manufacturers ?understated the risks of opioids, particularly the risk of abuse, addiction, and overdose? to boost sales.

Portenoy accused drug makers of distorting his research and that of other specialists by selectively quoting the results, including omitting information about the dangers of narcotics.

?Those messages about risk were neglected and de-emphasized,? he said in recorded video testimony shown in court. ?I think the purpose of doing that was to improve the sales of their products.?

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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