

'Disease mongering' turns health into disease

Pharmaceutical companies sponsor disease definitions and promote them to prescribers and consumers. Despite clear conflicts of interest, a lot of money can be made from telling healthy people they're sick.

In a recent issue of the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, researchers gave examples of "disease mongering" and suggested how to prevent the growth of this practice.

Some forms of medicalizing ordinary life may be better described as "disease mongering," extending the boundaries of treatable illness to expand markets for new products.

[Read the full text of this research paper on the BMJ website.](#)

Disease mongering can include turning ordinary processes or ailments into medical problems.

For example, around the time that Merck's hair growth drug finasteride (Propecia) was first approved in Australia, leading newspapers featured new information about the emotional trauma associated with hair loss, said the authors.

Disease mongering can also include seeing mild symptoms as serious, and treating personal problems as medical ones. A senior Roche official told the authors that company promotion exaggerated the level of social phobia in Australia.

Risks are increasingly portrayed as diseases according to the authors, who cited the example of corporate-backed promotional activities for osteoporosis that attempt to persuade millions of healthy women worldwide that they are sick.

Although these observations of disease mongering are selective and preliminary, the authors believe that more could be done to expose and reduce misleading "wonder drug" stories in the media, which help to facilitate so much disease mongering. They suggested that corporate-funded information about disease should be replaced by independent information.

In the same issue, the *BMJ* published a related article, reporting on the results of an online survey it took to ask medical doctors the question: "What is and what is not a disease?"

The aim was to prompt a debate on what is and what is not a disease and draw attention to the increasing tendency to classify people's problems as diseases. A top 20 list includes ageing, baldness, jet lag, cellulite, and anxiety about penis size. Some of these "non-diseases" already appear in official classifications of disease.

SOURCES: "Selling sickness: the pharmaceutical industry and disease mongering," *British Medical Journal*, April 13, 2002.

"In search of 'non-disease,'" *British Medical Journal*, April 13, 2002.

Summary points

Some forms of "medicalisation" may now be better described as "disease mongering" —extending the boundaries of treatable illness to expand markets for new products

Alliances of pharmaceutical manufacturers, doctors, and patients groups use the media to frame conditions as being widespread and severe

Disease mongering can include turning ordinary ailments into medical problems, seeing mild symptoms as serious, treating personal problems as medical, seeing risks as diseases, and framing prevalence estimates to maximise potential markets

Corporate funded information about disease should be replaced by independent information

Recommendations for "de-medicalising" normal conditions

- Move away from using corporate funded information on medical conditions/ diseases
- Generate independent accessible materials on conditions and diseases
- Widen notions of informed consent to include information about controversy surrounding the definitions of conditions and diseases