

Review

SiCKO is Boffo but Not Anti-Pharmaco Per Se

Pharma Merely a "Necessary Evil"

By John Mack



While the pharmaceutical industry is part of Michael Moore's—and many other people's—"Axis of Evil" consisting of pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, and insurance companies, he does cut the industry some slack in his new movie "SiCKO," which I saw on June 7 at a special screening in New York City. According to Moore, Big Pharma is merely a "necessary evil," whereas insurance companies are just not necessary at all—at least not the for-profit insurance industry.

Regular readers of Pharma Marketing Blog and Pharma Marketing News are well aware that I have been trying for some time to be invited to a pre-release screening of SiCKO (see, for example, "[Moore: Please Don't Ignore Us Pharma Bloggers](#)").

Finally, on June 6, I received a call from the producers—The Weinstein Company—notifying me that there will be 3 or 4 screenings in New York in the coming days. I picked the earliest possible day, which was June 7.

Scant Public Relations

I must say that the PR experience was underwhelming, especially in comparison with the treatment I received at Dorland for the screening of Centocor's disease awareness movie INNERSTATE (see "Innerstate Private Screening: Philadelphia Style"). Michael wasn't there. There were no producers present either, not even PR people to answer any questions. I was merely

greeted by a young woman who asked my name, handed me the PR material, and instructed me to take a seat in the screening room.

No goodies, not even water, were available to the audience. But at least the seats were plush, living room-style upholstered chairs and were much more comfortable than the conference room chairs at Dorland!

There were only about 3 or 4 of us in the NYC screening audience. Frankly, I was expecting more reporters and bloggers to be there. I also read that only a few invited healthcare lobbyists showed up for the Washington, DC screening (see "Lobbyists Also Get No Popcorn at Their Screening of SiCKO", p. 4).

I've been reading for some time about how Moore et al will be reaching out to bloggers in Washington, DC and San Francisco. If my NYC experience is any indication, this hastily prepared PR effort to "reach out" to journalists and bloggers, hardly did the PR about the effort justice. Perhaps the NYC-area bloggers are not as important as are the DC-area or SF-area bloggers. Now I know that the Washington focus was on lobbyists, not bloggers.

Focus is on Health Insurers

The truth is, neither the pharmaceutical industry nor the bloggers who write about the industry are as important to Michael Moore as we thought. One hint that this may be the case comes from a statement in the press materials I received:

"While major pharmaceutical firms are profit-obsessed corporations that bankroll Washington politicians and often lie about their research and development costs, the filmmakers viewed prescription drugs as 'a necessary evil' that may ultimately help patients. The same can be said for hospitals—though they, like Pharma, should be regulated and run more efficiently, people obviously need them.

"Such allowances, however, couldn't be made for private insurance—a completely unnecessary factor when it comes to health care," says Megan O'Hara, one of SiCKO's producers. To make his point even more emphatic, Moore decided not to concentrate his efforts on the 45 million Americans

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who lacked medical insurance, but instead on the majority who are covered and were denied benefits or became strangled with ridiculous bureaucratic red tape."

SiCKO does indeed focus on the health insurance industry with only a few references being made to pharmaceuticals. It does, however, blast Billy Tauzin, CEO of the trade group Pharmaceutical Researchers & Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), for his support of Medicare Part D legislation and his subsequent reward from the drug industry of a \$2 million salary.

I particularly liked the video clips of Tauzin in late night Congressional sessions challenging other lawmakers with "no one here loves their momma better than me." He sounded like Al Jolson!

But, as promised, SiCKO is not about Moore confronting CEOs and other corporate bigwigs as he does in his other movies. Pharma had feared this would happen when SiCKO was just a gleam in Moore's eye. Ken Johnson, senior vice president of the PhRMA trade group, told a journalist that industry executives were "freaking out and pulling their hair out."

Michael Alerts

Indeed, Big Pharma went on lockdown. "Michael Alerts" were sent out to company employees working for at least six major drug companies, warning them to watch out for Moore and his film crews. "We ran a story in our online newspaper saying Moore is embarking on a documentary—and if you see a scruffy guy in a baseball cap, you'll know who it is," a Pfizer spokesman told the L.A. Times. Late last year, CNBC reporter Mike Huckman noted "the level of paranoia was extreme" when he covered a drug company's analyst conference, questioning the reason for the high anxiety as "The Michael Moore Effect."

Moore does believe, however, that pharmaceutical companies should be more regulated "like Con Edison," which I take to mean government oversight of drug pricing. But he does not dwell or even mention price controls in SiCKO.

In Their Own Words

Moore's approach is very similar to the approach Centocor took in its INNERSTATE "drugumentary." He focused on real problems of real people and let them tell their stories. I dare say that any one reading this could find him or herself in the shoes of one of these people some day, God forbid.

Take the fifty-plus year old couple who had to move into a single room in their daughter's basement after they went bankrupt paying medical bills. The father had multiple heart attacks and the

mother had cancer, I believe. Both had good jobs—the wife was a newspaper editor and the husband a machinist—and "good" medical insurance, which maxed out and left them high and dry, or rather low and wet in their daughter's basement.

The film focused on these kinds of Americans, although it did start out with an uninsured guy stitching his own wounded knee—pretty gory! But, as Moore says, this is not a film about the 45 million Americans without health insurance; "it's about the rest of us 250 million Americans with insurance."

Main Message: Remove Profits from Insurance
SiCKO's main message is that the profit motive should be removed from health insurance, presumably by having a national health insurance program as they do in the UK. The movie documents how health insurance companies deny coverage to maximize profits, which, Moore reminds us, is a fiduciary responsibility of all corporations with stockholders.

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Lobbyists Also Get No Popcorn at Their Screening of SiCKO

According to a June 21 Washington Post article, "As part of yesterday's rollout for "Sicko," Michael Moore—liberal firebrand, master of the promotional stunt—invited 900 pharmaceutical and insurance lobbyists to a free screening of his attack on America's health-care system. Guess how many showed up? Eleven."

Could it be because SiCKO screenings don't include popcorn, soda, or even bottled water?

Said John Greene of the National Association of Health Underwriters: "I want to ask Mr. Moore, 'Where's the popcorn and soda?'" (See [Washington Post article](#).)

Perhaps pharma lobbyists read my review, where I asked the same question, and decided that a movie without food was as useful as a fish without a bicycle?

Moore visits several other countries that have national health insurance, including Canada, the UK, France, and Cuba. All but Cuba are rated superior to the US in health care quality by the World Health Organization. A clip in the movie from a British news story claims that the poorest British citizen has a longer life expectancy than the richest American.

Counter Arguments

SiCKO attempts to counter all the familiar arguments against national health insurance such as lack of care, physician dissatisfaction, etc. It does this by interviewing people like the GP in the UK who owns a late model Audi and a \$1 million apartment in London and whose annual salary (including benefits) is about \$200,000. How does he rate this? Outcomes, my friend, outcomes. If his patients do better, he makes more money.

Not that such anecdotal evidence proves anything, but it really makes a good impression when you hear these stories from real people rather than from PhRMA or the AMA.

A Little History

BTW, Moore also blasts the AMA on this issue, especially during the "Hillary" years when then first lady Hillary Clinton tried to implement a national health insurance program. The AMA, claims Moore, orchestrated an all out attack along with other self-interested parties to defeat Hillary's efforts. And Moore doesn't spare Hillary, who he claims was bought by the healthcare industry for the sum of about \$800,000 in campaign contributions.

So, surprise! Moore and Hillary are not a pair!

SiCKO will give many people something to think about and cry about. I'm not going to get into the crying here except to say that at many points in the movie, there wasn't a dry eye in the screening room!

It Takes a Revolution

One thing I left the movie thinking about is how can Americans change this so that, as Moore says, there is more "we" than "me" inherent in how health care is managed in this country?

"Remember how we all felt right after 911?" Moore asks at one point. He was referring to the sense we all had of being "we" Americans and sharing what we have with others in order to survive and get past our fear. Although this feeling was short-lived after 911, Moore suggests that that was the feeling in Britain after WWII—when the country was devastated by war—that led to its National

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Maybe SiCKO isn't so sick

by Christiane Truelove, editor of **MedAdNews**

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On my desk when I came into work on Monday was an unlabeled CD-ROM, left by a source I shall refuse to name. Said source had somehow found SiCKO online and made me a copy. Of course I had to watch it; I could not pass up a preview I did not have to hop on a train or drive to New York City for.

Mr. Mack had already been to see a preview of the film after asking Mr. Moore for a screening. Like Mr. Mack, I found the film to be far less harsh in its indictment of the pharmaceutical industry than I think the industry is expecting. Health insurance companies are the target of most of Mr. Moore's ire.

Still, Dr. Goldberg and Peter Pitts for the Center for Medicine in the Public Interest are not taking any chances. CMPI has made a video and posted it on YouTube. Folks on the street are asked if they would take medical advice from Michael Moore. Of course, they all say no.

Dr. Goldberg, Mr. Pitts, I respect you both. You're passionate defenders of the pharmaceutical industry and what you believe is best for patients. But before you make one more fat joke about Mr. Moore, go see the film. I'd love to hear what you have to say about Mr. Moore's praise of the Canadian and United Kingdom health-care systems. Certainly the patients he interviews seem happy enough with these systems and think the U.S. health insurance system is awful.

Jim Edwards at BrandweekNRx certainly agrees with the assessment of the U.S. health insurance system. He details his struggles to find an MRI screening that's actually cheaper with insurance. And he also states his reasons why DrugWonks' campaign to demonize Michael Moore will fail. "The DrugWonks people seem to believe that if they can just remind us enough times that it is ironic that a clinically obese man has made a film about health care, that somehow nobody will watch or believe it," Mr. Edwards says. "But here is what DrugWonks just doesn't get: Moore gets one thing right — it is a nightmare being a patient in the American health-care system."

Health System (NHS), which is, it seems, beloved by the Brits. "If anyone were to suggest that we get rid of NHS," said one former British Labor party member, "there would be a revolution."

Will it take another American Revolution to change our healthcare system? Not necessarily. It may only take one person.

That was my other takeaway from SiCKO: one person can make a difference.

Speaking to an older conservative Canadian riding around in a golf cart, Moore discovered that the most revered person in Canada is NOT Wayne Gretzky, but Thomas Clement Douglas. Looking up the history of the Canadian health system in Wikipedia, I learned that Douglas introduced universal public medicare to Canada. Mysteriously, Moore did not say much about Douglas in his film—perhaps due to the fact that Douglas was a socialist, albeit a democratically-elected socialist.

Is This Socialism?

Of course, socialism (democratically elected or not), is the great bogey man that AMA raised against Hillary in the 1990s and that has been consistently raised every time national health care is discussed here in the US.

Moore points out that we already have socialism here, but would never call it that. His examples are public schools and fire departments. We never pay out of pockets to be rescued by firefighters or send our kids to public schools. These services come from the taxes we pay for community services.

Cuba: Healthcare Libre

Speaking of firefighters and heroes, SiCKO exploits the lack of health care received by some 911 volunteers. We all know by now the story of how the movie shows these people getting expert medical care in Cuba. Aside from the propaganda value, you have to shed a tear seeing Cuban firefighters standing at attention to greet and hug the Americans saying all firefighters and 911 volunteers are "family."

Too bad we are not "family" when it comes to treating fellow Americans. That a hospital can get away with dropping off indigent women in skid row rather than treating them is a travesty, no matter whose "family" you belong to—conservative or socialist or somewhere in between. That, I believe is the main takeaway from SiCKO that Moore desires us to have.

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After Seeing SiCKO Oprah Calls for Town Hall Meeting



Ebony and ivory together in SiCKO harmony!

"This movie is very different [than other movies made by Moore]" says Oprah. "I want a town hall discussion about it. I think you [Moore] opened the door, but we need to get America talking about it. Republicans talking about it, Democrats talking about it...people who suffered talking about it."

She made this comment to her guest, Michael Moore, who showed clips from his film "SiCKO", which won critical acclaim in its Cannes debut.

Moore suggested that like fire departments, health care should not be run for profit. "Health care should be guaranteed to every American, remove the profit from the system, and regulate the pharmaceutical companies."

While Moore was uttering those words, Oprah could be heard saying "yeah, yeah" and her audience applauded vigorously.

"This is what I think is really great," Oprah said. "What you say at the end of the film. Make this country more about 'we' than about 'me'. Thank you for making that point."

Moore's Grassroots YouTube Initiative

As part of his campaign to get healthcare reform on the top of everyone's agenda, Moore entered a new realm of politics by soliciting videos from Americans chronicling their healthcare horror stories.



"I got to thinking after finishing the film," says Moore in his video pitch, "now that's there's YouTube, [I have a great chance] to ask those of you who are out there to send me your own healthcare stories...so if you videotape your story and send it here, I'll post it [on YouTube] and also take these YouTube videos to our members of Congress ...If we do this, there's a chance to get some action going."

Moore posted his video on June 6, 2007 and already it has received over 643,000 views, almost 1800 comments and 58 video responses.

Moore has established a group on YouTube where these videos will be displayed and discussions will be hosted ([click here](#)).

Together with Oprah Winfrey's "pledge" to hold a televised "Town Meeting" on people's reaction to SiCKO this summer or fall (see "After Seeing SiCKO Oprah Calls for Town Hall Meeting"), this is shaping up to be a political hot potato that presidential candidates on both sides of the aisle must contend with.

What Pharma Can Learn from Moore

I know that many pharmaceutical people hate Moore and will reject out of hand any notion that they can possibly learn something from him, but that would be a mistake.

Suppose, for example, Merck solicited YouTube videos from parents about their concerns regarding their daughters being infected with HPV? These personal stories—some of which may be from

women with cervical cancer—could have galvanized state legislators to pass mandatory vaccination laws WITHOUT being lobbied in back rooms by organizations secretly funded by Merck.

Blog Comments

My original review of SiCKO was published in Pharma Marketing Blog, to which several people submitted comments. I have included a few of these comments below. If you would like to participate in this discussion, please do so here.

Mark: Like this film will have any real impact. More than 50% of the USA is against continuing the WAR in Iraq and the war goes on.

Mack: "Our country is in danger, but not to be despaired of. Our enemies are numerous and powerful; but we have many friends, determining to be free, and heaven and earth will aid the resolution. On you depend the fortunes of America. You are to decide the important question, on which rest the happiness and liberty of millions yet unborn. Act worthy of yourselves." -- Joseph Warren, Boston Massacre Oration, 1775

Anonymous: Moore didn't mention anything about lawsuits in his film, how would our government deal with that? Patients suing to try to get money for any less than perfect outcome? Medicine isn't a perfect science, and the UK, France and Canada know that. The US has let lawyers sue for millions, how did John Edwards make his billions? The government would be bankrupt with lawsuits if we had National Healthcare.

Mack: Remember the 911 victims fund? Didn't the families have to sign a waiver to forego civil suits to receive coverage from the gov't? Same thing for universal health coverage.

Anonymous: Thanks for your reply. If families have to sign waivers, and there are no more medical malpractice suits, do you think congress, of which most are lawyers, are really going to vote for National Health Care?

Mack: Sorry, I cannot solve ALL our problems. Do you want to kill all the lawyers? Other than that, I do not know how we can bypass Congress except for rebellion!

Whatever the solution, it takes strong leadership.

Congress is a bunch of followers, not leaders.

So, my solution to your problem with Congress is to elect a strong leader who has the vision to make these kinds of changes.

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Christine: About what was said about lawsuits - I haven't seen Sicko yet, so I don't know what exactly MM says, but the current proposal for universal health care, HR 676, provides for a government-provided, single-payer insurance system with no deductibles, copays, etc. that reimburses doctors for the care of their patients. However, health care is still provided privately, and doctors would presumably still be held accountable for their errors. So lawsuits would not be directed at the government, but rather private physicians.

Mack: Probably the most realistic soln.

Anonymous: Maybe realistic, but there would be massive retirements of physicians. Universal Health Care could not pay them enough to be able to handle malpractice insurance premiums. So when they overhaul the insurance industry, which don't get me wrong, is needed, they would need to enact some meaningful tort reform to make it work. The one physician shown in the film is in the vast minority. We know of docs who after spending years getting an education are making \$40K/year for 60/70hr work weeks and looking at alternative careers.

Mack: I guess you are talking about docs in the UK. They may have spent many years getting educated, but how much did they pay for that education?

Not that I really know the answer, but if this country had its priorities straight, it would support physician education.

If all expenses were paid in return for X years of national health service, maybe that would help.

Afterward, like in the UK, physicians who want to make more money could go into private practice and work for the wealthy.

This sort of thing is even happening here, except that while the wealthy get concierge care, the rest of us are stuck in waiting rooms or, if we are so unlucky as not to have insurance, thrown out in the streets after getting minimal emergency care.

Pharma Marketing News

Did PhRMA Send a SiCKO Spy to Cannes?



According to a recent report in BusinessWeek magazine, "The pharmaceutical industry received reports from Cannes, according to Ken Johnson, senior vice-president of the Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), who says a friend called him from France after seeing the flick."

Moore responded with this challenge to Billy Tauzin, CEO of PhRMA; "BusinessWeek today reported that the drug industry had a "friend" reporting back to them from the screening of 'SiCKO' at Cannes. Billy Tauzin, the chief lobbyist for the drug industry, doesn't need to hide behind a "friend" if he wants to see the movie. I invite Mr. Tauzin to join me in New Hampshire later this month for a screening of 'SiCKO' followed by a town hall discussion with a group of undecided New Hampshire voters."

Moore went on to say "When Tauzin was still in Congress and carrying the drug industry's dirty water—before getting his current multi-million dollar a year contract as the nation's top drug lobbyist—he was the symbol of the death-grip that the health care industry has over health care reform. In fact, Tauzin has a starring role in 'SiCKO' and I am sure the spy reported back on the film's treatment of Mr. Tauzin. The town hall forum will certainly offer the public a chance to explore Tauzin's record and the drug industry's role in our health care system."

I wonder who the spy was? I sense a mission for ... PhRMA Intern! (See "[PhRMA Intern Makes Movie Mogul an Offer He Can't Refuse!](#)")

