



Blockbuster Drugs: The Rise and Decline of the Pharmaceutical Industry

By Jie Jack Li

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For the world's largest prescription drug manufacturers, the last few years have been a harrowing time. Recently, Pfizer's Lipitor, GlaxoSmithKline's Advair, AstraZeneca's Seroquel, and Sanofi-Aventis and Bristol-Myers Squibb's Plavix all came off patent in the crucial U.S. market. This so-called "patent cliff" meant hundreds of billions of dollars in lost revenue and has pharmaceutical developers scrambling to create new drugs and litigating to extend current patent protections.

Having spent most of his career in drug discovery in "big pharma," Dr. Li now delivers an insider's account of how the drug industry ascended to its plateau and explores the nature of the turmoil it faces in the coming years. He begins with a survey of the landscape before "blockbuster drugs," and proceeds to describe how those drugs were discovered and subsequently became integral to the business models of large pharmaceutical companies. For example, in early 1980s, Tagamet, the first "blockbuster drug," transformed a minor Philadelphia-based drug maker named SmithKline & French into the world's ninth-largest pharmaceutical company in terms of sales. The project that delivered Tagamet was nearly terminated several times because research efforts begun in 1964 produced no apparent results within the first eleven years. Similar stories accompany the discovery and development of now-ubiquitous prescription drugs, among them Claritin, Prilosec, Nexium, Plavix, and Ambien.

These stories, and the facets of the pharmaceutical industry that they reveal, can teach us valuable lessons and reveal many crucial aspects about the future landscape of drug discovery. As always, Dr. Li writes in a readable style and intersperses fascinating stories of scientific discovery with engaging human drama.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Li (Laughing Gas, Viagra and Lipitor: The Human Stories Behind the Drugs We Use) surveys Big Pharma's "golden age" with a nostalgic yet thoughtful history of the science and personalities behind drugs that changed the lives of countless patients while making billions of dollars for the companies that brought them to market. The author examines five classes of blockbusters that gave Big Pharma both esteem and fortunes: from Tagament and Prilosec for peptic ulcers to blockbuster allergy treatments such as Benadryl and Claritin, to blood thinners that refined old-line heparin, to the modern conquest of pain with drugs descended from opium—“one of the first medicines for man.” Li also engagingly relates the tales of the human conflict often involved with discovery, like a precipitous one-year drop in profits that resulted from a feud between an American drug company and one of its Canadian counterparts. Drug discovery is now getting more attention from academia as new products wane, Li notes, but he decries Big Pharma's “merger mania” and its tarnished reputation, especially following Merck's abrupt withdrawal of anti-inflammatory Vioxx because it led to increased risk of heart attacks and strokes among those taking it. Nevertheless, Li delights in the “creativity, serendipity and perseverance” of big drug discoveries—lessons he hopes may prompt a renaissance in the industry. (Dec.)

Review

Recipient of the 2015 Alpha Sigma Nu Book Award.

"Once again, with his latest book, Jack Li has produced a wonderfully fascinating and rich history of the so-called 'Blockbuster Drugs.' From the treatment of ulcers and acid reflux, to the control of allergies, and the conquest of pain, Dr. Li weaves a beautiful tale of these extraordinary medicines, familiar to all. The book is full of detail, with an extensive bibliography, and, for the molecular connoisseur, includes chemical structures in the Appendix. Dr. Li is rapidly becoming a premiere figure for writing about medicines for the educated population!" -- *Gordon W. Gribble, The Dartmouth Professor of Chemistry, Dartmouth University*

"This enjoyable book describes more than a century of progress in the development of many major new medicines for the treatment of human illness. It provides deep insights into the process of innovation and also the remarkable individuals responsible for it. The accounts are understandable to the non-scientist but also valuable to researchers and practitioners of modern medicine. There is a nice balance between the human, historical and medical sides of drug discovery -- one of the most consequential activities of our times." -- *E.J. Corey, Nobel Laureate, Harvard University*

"Jie Jack Li takes us through the ages of pharmaceuticals in this informative and engaging book. Professor Li links the medical world with its much broader cultural background in a way that will appeal to many. If you are interested in the past, present, and future of the medicines you take and the background to their production, look no further than this book." --*New York Journal of Books*

About the Author

Dr. Jie Jack Li is currently an Associate Professor of Chemistry at the University of San Francisco. Before his independent academic career, he spent fifteen years in drug discovery at big pharma including Pfizer and Bristol-Myers Squibb Company. He is the author of *Triumph of the Heart: The Story of Statins* (Oxford University Press, 2009), *Modern Organic Synthesis in the Laboratory* (Oxford University Press, 2007), and *Laughing Gas, Viagra, and Lipitor: The Human Stories Behind the Drugs We Use* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

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