To recast a famous philosophical conundrum, what would happen if hundreds of thousands of Americans died, but the media never reported that calamity?

I spend hours each morning closely reading the print editions of my daily newspapers, and for over a decade that question has seemed real rather than merely hypothetical. The reason may be summarized in one word: “Vioxx.”

Vioxx? What’s Vioxx? I suspect that the overwhelming majority of Americans today would have only the vaguest recollection of that name, and if forced to guess, the largest number might respond: “Vioxx—Is that a new Pokemon character?”

Actually, no. The Vioxx Scandal of the mid-2000s represented one of the greatest medical health disasters of modern times, almost entirely due to corporate greed. An ocean of Americans perished, tens of thousands by official government estimate, but with the true figure more likely ranging into the hundreds of thousands. Yet despite that huge body-count, no one was ever punished, and the entire affair was quickly shoved down the memory hole by our national media, perhaps because the media itself had been a major financial participant.

The story is a simple one. At the end of the 1990s, pharmaceutical giant Merck introduced a patented, vastly more expensive substitute for simple aspirin, which it marketed as a painkiller to the elderly by spending hundreds of millions of dollars on direct-to-consumer advertising through television and other media outlets. The advertising did the trick, and twenty-five million Americans were eventually prescribed Vioxx, generating over $2 billion in annual revenue.
The media benefited from the advertising, Merck benefited from the sales, and many millions of Americans benefited from an effective arthritis remedy that supposedly had fewer side-effects than old-fashioned aspirin. Unfortunately, one of these side-effects turned out to be a huge increase in the risk of strokes and heart attacks[1], many of them fatal.

Some of initial media reports indicated that Merck had desperately fought behind the scenes to suppress the FDA study[2] demonstrating that their extremely lucrative drug had already killed at least 35,000 Americans, but then “voluntarily” recalled that drug just days before the research report was finally scheduled for release.

And there was a striking epilogue to this scandal, ignored by the media, but which I discussed in an article[3] published a few years ago. Since the historical facts haven’t changed, I quote a few of my crucial paragraphs:

This story of serious corporate malfeasance largely forgiven and forgotten by government and media is depressing enough, but it leaves out a crucial factual detail that seems to have almost totally escaped public notice. The year after Vioxx had been pulled from the market, the New York Times and other major media outlets published a minor news item, generally buried near the bottom of their back pages, which noted that American death rates had suddenly undergone a striking and completely unexpected decline.

The headline of the short article that ran in the April 19, 2005 edition of USA Today was typical: “USA Records Largest Drop in Annual Deaths in at Least 60 Years.” During that one year, American deaths had fallen by 50,000 despite the growth in both the size and the age of the nation’s population. Government health experts were quoted as being greatly “surprised” and “scratching [their] heads” over this strange anomaly, which was led by a sharp drop in fatal heart attacks.

On April 24, 2005, the New York Times ran another of its long stories about the continuing Vioxx controversy, disclosing that Merck officials had knowingly concealed evidence that their drug greatly increased the risk of heart-related fatalities. But the Times journalist made no mention of the seemingly inexplicable drop in national mortality rates that had occurred once the drug was taken off the market, although the news had been reported in his own paper just a few days earlier.

A cursory examination of the most recent 15 years worth of national mortality data provided on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website offers some intriguing clues to this mystery. We find the largest rise in American mortality rates occurred in 1999, the year Vioxx was introduced, while the largest drop occurred in 2004, the year it was withdrawn. Vioxx was almost entirely marketed to the elderly, and these substantial changes in national death-rate were completely concentrated within the 65-plus population. The FDA studies had proven that use of Vioxx led to deaths from cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks and strokes, and these were exactly the factors driving the changes in national mortality rates.
The impact of these shifts was not small. After a decade of remaining roughly constant, the overall American death rate began a substantial decline in 2004, soon falling by approximately 5 percent, despite the continued aging of the population. This drop corresponds to roughly 100,000 fewer deaths per year. The age-adjusted decline in death rates was considerably greater.

Back in college I had a strong interest in the old Soviet Union, and was always amused when experts explained that some of the most important news developments were often tucked away as small items in the back pages of *Pravda* or *Izvestia*. I find it distressful that the same situation now seems true in our own society.

I was prompted to resurrect this old story after I attended a rare dinner party a few days ago with a group of Republican political activists. One of the individuals was quite agitated at the supposedly dangerous nature of our Chinese imports, and launched into a lengthy diatribe against that totally corrupt foreign government. He angrily reminded his listeners about the Melamine Scandal, in which baby food products sold in China were adulterated by a potentially harmful plastic chemical compound, leading to the illness of hundreds of thousands of infants and the death of six. Although I was too polite to interrupt his monologue, I knew those details quite well since I had directly contrasted that case—and the reaction of the Chinese government—with how America had handled the Vioxx disaster:

China’s leaders may not be democratically elected, but they pay close attention to strong popular sentiment. Once pressed, they quickly launched a national police investigation which led to a series of arrests and uncovered evidence that this widespread system of food adulteration had been protected by bribe-taking government officials. Long prison sentences were freely handed out and a couple of the guiltiest culprits were eventually tried and executed for their role, measures that gradually assuaged popular anger. Indeed, the former head of the Chinese FDA had been executed for corruption in late 2007 under similar circumstances.

Obviously, the two situations were not exactly parallel, but consider the different reactions by the national government and media, and what it implies about the realities of popular control in the two societies. In China, a wave of illness culminating in the deaths of six infants became a gigantic national scandal, leading to prison sentences and even executions for the corrupt businessmen responsible and the government officials who facilitated their crimes.

Meanwhile, in the United States a somewhat similar medical scandal producing a body-count perhaps fifty thousand times larger was quickly hushed up and forgotten by the media, with no serious government investigation or significant punishment for any of the guilty parties. The Merck CEO was forced to resign and replaced by one of his top lieutenants, but allowed to keep...
his $50 million in past bonuses, greatly boosted by lucrative Vioxx sales. A lengthy class-action lawsuit was eventually settled, with the trial lawyers splitting almost $2 billion among themselves, while payouts to the actual victims amounted to roughly $100 per Vioxx user or perhaps $10,000 per American fatality. Given these facts, is it China or is it America that seemingly possesses a free and vigorous media, with a government responsive to the will of the people and protective of their best interests?

Nearly a half century ago, China was in the throes of Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and its government behaved very oddly, leading to all sorts of long-term problems for Chinese society. These days, China seems like a perfectly normal country with a perfectly normal government, and instead it is our own political leadership whose bad behavior may inspire much hand-wringing among future historians.

When ruling elites have little concern for the best interests of the populations they govern, the results can be dire. Under the drunken and totally corrupt Yeltsin Regime of the 1990s, Russia’s national wealth was looted by its financial Oligarchs, who siphoned off vast quantities to their overseas holdings while reducing much of the Russian population to penury. As a direct consequence, Russia suffered one of the greatest peacetime demographic collapses in modern world history, a collapse that was quickly ended[4] and gradually reversed[5] once a patriotic nationalist such as Vladimir Putin came to power and implemented different policies.

Late last year a pair of prominent scholars revealed a stunning rise in the death rates of white Americans[6] over the last dozen years, and some have noted the intriguing parallel between Russia of the Yeltsin years and the situation in our own country[7]. The rapid growth in the highly lucrative prescription drug industry seems a major contributor to this dire health situation, which is heavily concentrated among the non-affluent, whose real wages have stagnated or declined for most of the last 40 years. When large population groups gradually notice that their mortality rates are rising and their financial well-being is falling, they may grow dissatisfied with their existing national elites, and the widespread popularity of Donald Trump in such circles should hardly come as a great surprise.

In his most recent book[8], Prof. Michael Hudson, a distinguished international economist, has correctly emphasized the strong structural similarities between biological and economic systems. Based on this useful correspondence, he suggests that many of America’s current problems may be best understood once we recognize that our society has been very heavily parasitized by its extractive elites. He further notes that parasites typically attempt to seize control of the sensory organs and central nervous system of their unfortunate host, thereby disorienting their victim or even convincing it that they represent an integral and necessary part of the organism’s own tissue.

Since the mainstream media constitute the sensory organs of our body politic, Hudson’s words often ring true as I read my morning newspapers.

For Further Reading:

- Chinese Melamine and American Vioxx: A Comparison[9]
• China’s Rise, America’s Fall[10]
• Our American Pravda[11]

Source References

[1] a huge increase in the risk of strokes and heart attacks =>

[2] Merck had desperately fought behind the scenes to suppress the FDA study =>


[6] a stunning rise in the death rates of white Americans =>

[7] the intriguing parallel between Russia of the Yeltsin years and the situation in our own country => http://www.unz.com/akarlin/soviet-fishtown/


