

Ethical Transparency and Economic Medicalization

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ABSTRACT. This article introduces the concept of economic medicalization where non-medical problems are transformed into medical problems in order to achieve the objective of corporate shareholder wealth maximization. Following an overview of the differences in ethical norms applicable to medical ethics and business ethics, the economic medicalization of medical research practice and publication is examined in some detail. This motivates a general discussion of the problems involved in the ethical approval process for medical research that balances the interests of both business and government in the market for medical products and services.

KEY WORDS: shareholder wealth maximization, medicalization, bioethics, medical ethics

Medical research and development (R&D) is an area where the interests of private sector firms often conflict with those of governments (Angell, 2004; Moynihan and Cassels, 2005; Robbins-Roth, 2000). More precisely, the private sector firms conducting the bulk of medical R&D are motivated by the ethical standards of the marketplace (Poitras, 1994).¹ These standards differ from those of government which is an advocate for patients as well as having some control of the health care system through publicly funded medical care and drug plans. In this environment, there is a strong incentive for corporations to influence the public perception of the efficacy of certain drugs and medical devices (Avorn, 2006). There has been accumulating evidence that current levels of ethical disclosure do not make it possible to separate legitimate medical R&D from a corporate strategy of marketing patent protected medical products to physicians and, more recently, directly to consumers (Sismondo, 2004; Thompson et al., 2001; Turner et al., 2008). This article examines the economic medicalization of medical research practice and

publication in order to motivate a more general examination of the problems involved in the ethical approval process for medical research that balances the interests of both business and government in the market for medical products and services.

Medical ethics, bioethics and business ethics

Medicalization is a social process where the medical profession extends its authority over matters not directly concerned with the analysis and treatment of biophysical disorders. In this definition, the medical profession includes not only practising doctors and associations of doctors, but also the pharmaceutical industry, providing the drugs that are an essential component of modern medicine; the academic institutions and journals involved in training doctors and sponsoring essential research activities; and, the government granting agencies and other sponsors that supply essential funding to the research conducted by the medical profession.² Significantly, because the source of capital for the pharmaceutical industry is the global financial markets, the primary ethical motivations of this important player in the medical profession differs substantively from those of the other players. The implications of this difference are the substance for a legion of studies on the marketing networks of the pharmaceutical companies and the sophisticated efforts involved in selling products. The differing ethical motivations within the medical profession create a dilemma for government regulators: how to balance public health concerns with the need to restrict the economic footprint of the regulatory framework on an industry that produces and distributes some of the most important products of modern science?