

Patients are dying from lack of good medical research

Ben Goldacre

A recent study found that research funded by drug companies is often biased in favour of the sponsor's drug. Medical academics like me can roll their eyes at naughty old pharma.

But there's a problem. The evidence shows that medical academics also misbehave. Only half of clinical trials ever report their results. And that, not surprisingly, is the more flattering half.

It hardly matters whether big pharma or academic researchers are worst. All any sane outsider wants to know is why trial results are ever withheld from doctors, researchers and patients. You can't make informed choices about treatments when half the data is left unpublished. Why isn't there a law forcing all results to be reported?

And there's the rub. Medicine talks a good game and presents itself as a data-driven enterprise. But the reality is a mess. Evidence-based medicine is an ecosystem of players: regulators, companies, researchers, funders, journal editors, health services, drug companies, and more. Every one is flawed and almost every aspect of bad behaviour by drug companies is a rational response to a chaotic, outdated system for disseminating knowledge in medicine.

For example: all doctors should know which is the best treatment for any condition they treat, at any given time. In reality, dissemination of information is sometimes little

better than word of mouth. The pharma heinous for running their own biased "training" for doctors? Maybe, but any sane company would exploit this vacuum and send their marketing teams out to promote a partial view of the evidence.

Even when trial results are published, industry researchers spin them to give a partial picture, and so do academics. Blame industry? Blame the academics? Go ahead. But blame the journal editors too.

Meanwhile, vital low-cost trials of common treatments are blocked because regulators over-interpret EU red tape on research. At worst, trials are abandoned. At best they are delayed and made wildly expensive. This has happened with two trials on statins that I've been involved in. Blame the EU? Blame the regulators? Blame academics, for failing to shout about this.

So bash the pharma industry. I will join you. But medicine is a mess. We all need to own, discuss, and fix our own problems. Medical research is not an abstract project; academic navel-gazing in an ivory tower. It is a humble, practical service. When we tolerate chaos and bad data, then patients suffer, and die.