

OPEN LETTER

Does Drug Company Marketing Now Include Product Placement in the Movies?

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In the motion picture *A Beautiful Mind*, mathematical genius John Nash states that he is helped by the newer antipsychotics. This fictionalized statement flies in the face of several documented accounts of Nash's refusal to take any medication after 1970, thereby raising questions concerning why, and for whom, the fabricated statement was added. This article, an "open letter to the media," suggests that the pharmaceutical industry had a hand in recasting Nash's personal story of redemption—from an inspiring account of overcoming the most oppressive treatments and severe psychological distress with one's own resources and social support systems to an example of the centrality of psychiatric drugs to any reclamation of one's life.

Have pharmaceutical companies learned that product placement in high grossing movies is an excellent way to influence public opinion? Consider the high profile and now—Oscar winning film *A Beautiful Mind*. In the film, the mathematical genius John F. Nash, played by Russell Crowe, says, "I take the newer medications. They don't cure me, but they help." This is a totally fictionalized statement. By all accounts, Nash took no antipsychotic medication after 1970. This of course predates the so-called "newer antipsychotics" by some 20 years or more. Consider the following corroborations of the fact that Nash did not take these drugs:

1. Sylvia Nasar, in her award-winning biography of Nash *A Beautiful Mind* writes: "Nash's refusal to take the antipsychotic drugs after 1970, and indeed during most of the periods when he wasn't in the hospital during the 1960s, may have been fortunate" (1998, p. 353).
2. Sylvia Nasar (1994), once again, in an article in the *New York Times* a few years earlier, reports the impressions of arguably the two most important persons in Nash's life, his wife (Mrs. Nash) and his sister (Mrs. Legg). Talking about Nash's "miraculous remission," Nasar writes, "And as happens, for reasons unknown, in the case of some people with schizophrenia, it was not, according to Mrs. Nash or Mrs. Legg, due to any drug or treatment."

3. John Hoey, MD, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, in an article entitled "The Peculiar Genius of John Nash," writes: "How to account for this spontaneous remission—Nash refused to take antipsychotic drugs after 1970—is a matter of conjecture, and the price that Nash has paid for both his illness and his recovery is a distressing calculation" (p. 870).
4. There are also John Nash's own words. In his 1994 autobiography on the Nobel Prize Website (<http://www.nobel.se/economics/laureates/1994/nash-autobio.html>), Nash states: "But after my return to the dream-like delusional hypotheses in the later 60's I became a person of delusionally influenced thinking but of relatively moderate behavior and thus tended to avoid hospitalization and the direct attention of psychiatrists."
5. Finally, in a recent (February, 2002) phone interview, Nash was questioned about the impression the movie gave that his recovery was due to the newer medications. He was asked whether that impression was accurate or artistic license. Nash said it was artistic license (Personal communication, D. Antonuccio, February 2002).

So, from several sources, including Nash himself, one may conclude that Nash's amazing transformation was not due to any drug or treatment. The fictionalized statement in the movie, then, raises many questions:

How did such a statement get added to the script?

Whose interests are served by such a statement?

Did the expert listed in the movie credits, Max Fink, MD, influence this invented reality regarding Nash's life or did someone else?

Who is the expert working for or affiliated with?

Is this expert affiliated with any of the companies that produce the newer antipsychotics?

Did a drug company pay for that inserted statement like other companies purchasing the placement of their products?

It may not be coincidental that many articles and reviews of the movie close with information about the newer antipsychotics, commenting on their less serious side effects than the older varieties like Thorazine. For example, consider this excerpt from the *Seattle Times* (February 3, 2002):

Nash's approach came at a time when the pharmaceutical industry was coming out with more effective drugs whose side effects were milder than those he had initially been placed on. Today, there have been major advances, and mental health experts say newer anti-psychotics such as Zyprexa, Seroquel and Geodon do not have the debilitating side effects of some of the older drugs.

Let us set aside the questionable scientific veracity of such marketing statement for the moment (new drugs always promise more effectiveness and less side effects, only to be shown later to be comparable to their predecessors, e.g., tricyclic antidepressants vs. serotonin reuptake inhibitors [SRIs]). Those statements aside, the process through which one man's story of courage and determination fueled by hope and the love of his partner is channeled toward the marketing of "modern medical breakthroughs" is both remarkable and curious.

The justification that will be given for the fabricated line in the script will be fear of giving the "wrong message" about recovery from schizophrenia. "Experts" will say that cure without drugs is very rare and could give those suffering and their families a false hope that something other than drugs can help them. However, it is not rare at all.

Longitudinal studies show that many actually share Nash's story and reclaim their lives with community support and the love of family and friends. This "right" message is particularly ironic because Nash actually had to escape treatment and psychiatry before making his unique personal recovery.

The influence and marketing acumen of the pharmaceutical industry is legendary and many reports of the insidious nature of conflict of interest, ghostwriting practices, and other questionable or unethical acts are filed with an alarming but often ignored regularity. The "right message" crafted in the film, promulgated in reviews, and echoed by "experts" do those suffering and the public a great disservice. The film recasts Nash's personal story of redemption as an example of how important drugs are to any reclamation of one's life instead of as an inspiring account of how people can overcome the most oppressive treatments and severe psychological distress with their own resources and support systems.

REFERENCES

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