

## Opioids crisis

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## Sacklers deny responsibility for opioid crisis and claim lawyers 'invented false narrative'

A branch of the family launches website and claims they are victims of smear campaign by lawyers seeking to make profit



▲ Purdue Pharma headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut. Photograph: Mark Lennihan/AP

A branch of the Sackler family has launched a website denying responsibility for the US opioid epidemic even after agreeing to pay billions of dollars to settle lawsuits over the crisis.

The [website](#), called Judge for Yourselves, claims that the family and the company it owns, Connecticut-based Purdue Pharma, are victims of a smear campaign by lawyers seeking to profit from a “strategically invented false narrative” that the firm’s high strength prescription painkiller, OxyContin, drove [an epidemic](#) that has ultimately claimed more than 500,000 lives over the past two decades.

It says the Sackler family regrets that the drug “unexpectedly became part of the opioid crisis” but that those members who ran Purdue “acted lawfully and ethically”.

However, the site does not address Purdue’s [guilty pleas](#) to federal crimes on two occasions, in 2007 and last year, over its huge marketing push to sell OxyContin to the masses, which included false claims that the drug was less addictive than other narcotic painkillers.

Neither does it explain why the family is prepared to hand over a part of its fortune if it believes it did nothing wrong.

The publicity campaign by the branch of the family descended from Raymond Sackler, one of two brothers who owned Purdue Pharma when the company entered the opioid painkiller market, comes amid accusations that it is **misusing** bankruptcy proceedings to keep hold of some of the billions of dollars the family made from OxyContin.

Last week a judge approved a plan for the two branches of the Sackler family who have made their multi-billion-dollar fortune from OxyContin to pay \$4.5 billion to settle more than 3,000 civil lawsuits. The plan would also turn Purdue Pharma into a non-profit company.

But, in a highly unusual move, the deal would shield the Sacklers from further lawsuits, although not criminal prosecutions, and allow them to keep billions of dollars in profits from opioids even though the family itself has not sought bankruptcy.

The publicity drive also follows publication of a **damning biography** of the family, *Empire of Pain* by the New Yorker writer, Patrick Radden Keefe .

The Sacklers said the website is intended to counter “the many false allegations” by lawyers seeking to “vilify Purdue and the Sackler family”.

At the core of the denial is a selective use of statistics to assert that OxyContin never accounted for more than 4% of prescription opioid sales in the US and therefore could not have been a cause of the epidemic.

Analysts have called the claim “a legal and a public relations strategy” that **cherry picked data** on the sales of individual pills without taking account of the impact of their high narcotic content or their leading role in creating addiction.

When the amount of opioid in the drugs is taken into account, OxyContin accounted for about 20% of the market.

The Sacklers claims are at odds with a wide body of studies into the roots of the epidemic.

In 2017, Donald Trump’s presidential Commission on Combatting Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis said Purdue’s “aggressive promotion” of OxyContin, and its broader impact on the use of opioids for pain treatment, was a leading cause of the epidemic.

Two years ago, the National Bureau of Economic Research released a study of the impact of OxyContin which concluded that “the introduction and marketing of OxyContin explain a substantial share of overdose deaths over the last two decades”.

Purdue used its wealth to influence politicians and regulators, keeping open the floodgates to ever larger prescribing of opioids in the US, far beyond other developed countries, even as the evidence grew of a public health crisis [in the making](#).

The billionaire Sacklers face a struggle to restore [the reputation](#) of a family whose name is stamped on museums, art galleries and medical centres around the world thanks to their large donations from the profits of OxyContin.

Raymond Sackler sat on Purdue’s board from 1990 until his death in 2017. His son, Richard Sackler, was the company’s head of marketing and ramped up sales of OxyContin while painting people who overdosed on the drug as criminals to blame for [their own condition](#).

At hearings last year, one member of Congress [referred to the Sacklers](#) who own Purdue as the “most evil family in America”, after Kathe Sackler, a powerful former member of Purdue’s board, drew scorn when she said that while “my heart breaks for the parents who have lost their children”, the company was not at fault.

“There’s nothing that I can find that I would have done differently,” she said.

- *Chris McGreal is the author of American Overdose, The Opioid Tragedy in Three Acts.*