



## Hype drives prescriptions' popularity

Disease Mongering might sound like the latest horror movie, but it was the topic of a medical research conference held recently in Newcastle, Australia. The talks, presented by international researchers, were not likely popular with the drug industry.

**Question:** What is disease mongering?

**Answer:** The term refers to the process of enlarging the market for a disease treatment by convincing people that they have a medical condition that is treatable. Obvious examples of disease mongering are those TV ads that end in, "If you think you may have health condition X, ask your doctor about drug Y. ... And live life to the fullest."

Disease mongering tends to create "epidemics" and provide treatments for the epidemics. The result is that healthy people

turn into patients.

**Q:** How does disease mongering succeed?

**A:** Drug companies are not the only players in disease mongering. Physicians are searching for promising solutions to their patients' problems. A disease-mongered drug may be just the ticket to perceived patient and doctor satisfaction.

Journalists can be players, too. As more baby boomers face challenges of aging, interest in reversing normal biological decline is growing. Promising solutions help to sell news stories.

Patient advocate groups and researchers, knowingly or unknowingly, also can become disease mongers. Since funding is frequently based on seriousness of need, these groups may run exaggerated disease awareness campaigns with the best intentions to promote their chances of funding.

**Q:** Can disease mongering cause other harm?

**A:** Yes. With a multitude of drugs and unproven dietary supplements marketed for every modern ailment, adverse reactions are increasingly likely. Also, lesser-known, potentially effective solutions to a health condition may be overlooked. Researchers at the Australia conference reported on restless legs syndrome as a disease-mongered condition tied to a heavily marketed drug as the overshadowing treatment of choice. However, even these researchers failed to point out that a significant amount of evidence is pointing to iron deficiency as a likely cause in many suffers. But, everyone knows a big marketing budget is unlikely to be available to hype iron supplements for treating restless legs syndrome.

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