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# DEADLY CONSEQUENCES OF EMPHASIZING PROFITS OVER HUMAN LIFE: HOW CORPORATE GREED HAS CAUSED THE DEATH OF MILLIONS

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## Abstract

This paper demonstrates what happens when uncontrolled greed wins out over human life. The value of a life is infinite, and no cost-benefit analysis can justify purposely selling a product or service that can harm any person. This paper provides several examples demonstrating that millions of people have perished because of corporate malfeasance. Executives were aware that they were risking the life of consumers but prioritized profits over safety.

**Keywords:** business ethics, opioid epidemic, marketing of sugary beverages, Boeing's 737 Max, medical devices, climate change, menthol cigarettes, marketing of guns

## Introduction

There have been numerous incidents where corporate greed appears to have been prioritized even over human life. This paper will examine this phenomenon by way of presentation of several well-known examples. This article also suggests ways in which ethical management can reduce, if not avoid these deaths. Corporations are run by human decision-makers who, for the most part, were all college graduates from good schools and, of course, studied ethics. Let us first examine what these decision-makers may have learned from their studies.

## Learning Ethical Decision Making

It is unclear whether ethics can be taught (Friedman, Kleiner, & Lynch, 2022; Hühn, M. P. (2014); Parks-Leduc, Mulligan, & Rutherford, 2021; Wang & Calvano, 2015; Ward, 2020). Scholars have been trying to understand why supposedly ethical people make highly unethical choices (Bazerman & Tenbrusel, 2011; Carucci, 2016). Several researchers assert that culture – even more than what one is taught in school - plays a significant role in explaining differences in ethical policies among firms and countries (Whipple & Swords, 1992; Trobez et al., 2017; Scholtens & Dam, 2007). They contend that business ethics occur in a social and cultural environment controlled by a set of complex factors, including norms, formal values, codes, and laws. Sonenshein (2005) opined that corporate culture is the prime determinant of unethical conduct in corporations. Most companies have ethics and compliance policies, but it takes more than values statements to sustain an ethical workplace. Ethics starts at the top of the organization; if the corporate culture, either in government or private industry, encourages dishonest behavior, very few people will resist the temptation to bend the rules (Fox et al., 2007; Simmons, 2020).

Business decision-makers may also be influenced by business icons and examples revered by their instructors in business schools (e.g., Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, Lloyd Blankfein, Mark Zuckerberg). Many students are taught to appreciate the importance of maximization (of profits, utility, and shareholder value) but are given little understanding of the importance of ethics, customer satisfaction, and social responsibility in building a strong, prosperous, and sustainable company. This may explain why the least honest students are those majoring in economics and business, with only a 23% rate of honesty vs. slightly above 50% for humanities students (López-Pérez & Spiegelman, 2012).

It is interesting to note that Welch, who influenced numerous managers, is now seen as "The Man Who Broke Capitalism" by Daniel Gelles, author of a book with that title (Gelles, 2022a). Welch believed in outsourcing, offshoring, and firing the bottom 10% of employees annually, thus destroying morale. He kept the stock price up by focusing on cost-cutting and financial manipulation—the company eventually got into trouble with the SEC for accounting fraud charges. It became evident that Welch was responsible for creating a culture of doing anything, including deceptive tactics to distort earnings and keep the stock price increasing. One company that Welch acolytes greatly influenced was Boeing. Following Welch's management philosophy, the firm became more interested in cost-cutting than safety and quality (Gelles, 2022a, 2022b). After he retired, GE went into a nosedive and never recovered.

Many methods are used to teach business ethics. Traditionally, business ethics courses rely on case studies and ethical theories drawn from philosophy, mainly the writings of Aristotle, Mills, and Kant. Generally, ethics is examined from three approaches; virtue ethics, deontological, and utilitarian (consequentialist). Posner (1999) exposes the fallacy of this predominant approach to the teaching of ethics and morality:

If some moral principle that you read about in a book and that may have appealed to your cognitive faculty collides with your preferred, your self-advantaging way of life, you have only to adopt an alternative morality or, if you're bold enough, an antimorality (like that of Nietzsche, who famously attributed the morality of "good" people to their will to power) that does not contain the principle; and then you will be free from any burden of guilt (Posner, 1999, p. 74).

Some scholars believe that rather than focusing on changing behavior, courses in ethics should emphasize the cognitive biases that cause people to become unethical (Bazerman & Tenbrusel, 2011). One way to help ensure that people act following their own moral compass is by increasing ethical awareness and encouraging them to consider the consequences of decision-making. Sezer, Gino, and Bazerman (2015, p. 79) assert: "making morality salient before people face an opportunity to cheat decreases their tendency to do so."

Bazerman and Gino (2012) posit that the correct way to teach ethics is by using a behavioral ethics approach. Behavioral ethics takes a descriptive rather than a normative approach and attempts to assist professionals and students in understanding their behavior when facing an ethical dilemma. By making people aware of the contradictions between how they act and contrasting it with how they should ideally behave, they can develop their moral sensitivity. It may be challenging to teach individuals to be ethical, but it does appear possible to instill ethical awareness into students (Altmeyer et al., 2011; Bowden & Smythe, 2008; Williams & Dewett, 2005).

One way to demonstrate how essential ethics is to business is to focus on the destruction in human life that unethical behavior may cause (Gerstein & Friedman, 2015). Indeed, the deadliest ideas in all of business may have been maximizing profits and shareholder value. These ideologies might be misguided, and the misdoings of unethical

business leaders have damaged capitalism at its core. Surveys show that "nearly one-half of millennials are receptive to living under socialism and regard capitalism as a captive of greed" (Edwards, 2019, para. 1). By being aware of the alarming number of deaths caused by concentrating too much on profits, corporate leaders may understand why the firm's objective should be to maximize safety and product quality. A change in organizational culture can be an antidote to toxic practices that kill people.

In the following examples, we see that focusing on profits rather than safety and quality can indeed result in many deaths.

### **The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Factory Fire**

On March 25, 1911, The Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory fire in New York City claimed the lives of 146 workers — mostly young immigrant women, some only 15 and 16-years old — who perished because of locked doors and ignored safety features. There was considerable evidence that the owners' negligence was a major cause of the tragedy, yet they were held accountable. However, the tragedy did make the public aware of the horrible working conditions in sweatshops. It resulted in several laws and regulations to provide better protection for laborers and also led to the growth of labor unions. It galvanized the public and legislators by making them aware of how widespread death in the workplace had become.

### **Ford's Pinto Debacle: Is it Cheaper to Let People Burn?**

It is essential to recognize that corporations can commit crimes and should be prosecuted for them (Swiggert and Farrell, 1980-1981). The concept of corporate homicide was first recognized in 1978 in a class action case against Ford Motor Company. The company was accused of reckless homicide because three teenagers were killed in a Ford Pinto with known fuel tank design defects that made the cars prone to gas tank explosions in the case of rear-end collisions. An internal Ford memo (known as the infamous Pinto memo) was leaked to *Mother Jones Magazine* that proved that the company knew of the problems with the fuel tank before the Pinto was introduced but performed a cost/benefit analysis that suggested that it was cheaper to pay liability for burn deaths (cost of human life was pegged at \$200,000) and injuries (\$67,000) rather than spending \$11 per car to correct the defect for more than 12 million automobiles. More than two dozen people were killed or injured as a result of the Pinto's fatal design flaw before the car was recalled by Ford (Friedman et al., 2020).

The main lesson one might learn from the Ford Pinto case is that corporations should never place profits ahead of consumer safety. It should also be highlighted that Ford spent much money lobbying Congress not to adopt the NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) safety standards (Dowie, 1977).

### **Union Carbide's Pesticide Plant in Bhopal — Worst Industrial Accident in History, 3,800 Immediate Deaths**

On December 2, 1984, a storage tank in the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, began to leak methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas into the city. Approximately 3,800 people died immediately, and there were another 20,000 premature deaths from the poison gas over the next 20 years. This is the worst industrial accident in history and occurred because the company was more concerned with cutting costs than maintaining a safe workplace (Broughton, 2005; Gerstein & Friedman, 2015). The local government was aware of serious safety problems at the plant. Indeed, "the facility continued to operate with safety equipment and procedures far below the standards found in its sister plant in Institute, West Virginia." (Broughton, 2005, p. 4).

### **Aggressive Marketing of Opioids Has Resulted in the Death of 500,000**

Opioids have been responsible for over 500,000 deaths since the mid-1990s. Corporate greed is mainly responsible for this great catastrophe, although shifting attitudes about managing pain certainly contributed to it. Opioids have been around since after the Civil War, and they were widely prescribed from then until the 1920s, causing a massive increase in addictions. Opioids are appropriate for palliative care for terminally ill patients and in short-term situations after surgery. However, doctors started prescribing the opioid-based on Purdue Pharma's claim that it was safer and more effective than other painkillers and non-addictive, although there was information that it was addictive and resulted in overdoses. Indeed, there is minimal evidence that opioids are appropriate for chronic pain since patients develop a tolerance for it and need higher and higher doses for them to work (Lopez, 2019).

Years of aggressive and misleading promotion by Purdue Pharma entrenched misinformation that opioids were without risk, influencing medical education and ensuring less restrictive legislation through lobbying and campaign contributions. A report in the Annual Review of Health found that

Between 1996 and 2002, Purdue Pharma funded more than 20,000 pain-related educational programs through direct sponsorship or financial grants and launched a multifaceted campaign to encourage long-term use of [opioid painkillers] for chronic non-cancer pain. As part of this campaign, Purdue provided financial support to the American Pain Society, the American Academy of Pain Medicine, the Federation of State Medical Boards, the Joint Commission, pain patient groups, and other organizations. In turn, these groups all advocated for more aggressive identification and treatment of pain, especially the use of [opioid painkillers] (Lopez, 2019, p 20).

Purdue spent over \$200 million on Oxycontin marketing in 2001 alone. They spent vast amounts of money on all-expenses-paid symposia for pharmacists and physicians in fancy resorts in places such as Florida, Arizona, and California. The goal was to get them to prescribe and promote Oxycontin. Purdue also used a database that indicated which physicians were the highest prescribers of opioids in the United States so they could target them. There are more than 100 internal company memos that reveal that the company knew that its opioids had the potential to be addictive. (Strachan, 2019).

Insys Therapeutics was another company that put greed before safety. They developed a sublingual formulation of Fentanyl called Subsys for pain management. Insys became a phenomenally successful IPO, and its revenue approached \$500 million by 2015. The following are some of the methods used to fuel the sales of Subsys that included bribing doctors. But as *Mother Jones* reports:

Several Insys employees were simultaneously filing whistleblower lawsuits alleging that the addictive drug was marketed, off-label, to patients who suffered from all kinds of pain, and detailing dubious sales tactics – including, allegedly, taking doctors to strip clubs, encouraging sales reps to sleep with and give lap-dances to doctors, hiring doctors' significant others, paying kickbacks for more prescriptions, compensating physicians for speaking at events based on the volume of Subsys prescriptions written, and posing as doctors' representatives to get insurance to cover the drug (Strachan, 2019, p. 28).

### **Boeing Transforms Itself from Company that Prides Itself on Quality and Safety to**

**Focus on Stock Price—737 Max Crashes Kill 346 people**

Robison (2021) blames the highly compensated executives who transformed a company that *previously* prided itself on quality and safety for the two 737 Max crashes that killed 346 people. Prior to this change in attitude, if executives were not satisfied with the reliability of a plane, they would modify it despite costly delays. Once Boeing shifted its focus to its stock price, the culture changed, and the goal was to cut costs, look for shortcuts, and ignore what deliberative and cautious engineers wanted.

The senior engineer commenting on the culture at Boeing stated, "Boeing's actions on the issue pointed to a culture that emphasized profit, in some cases, at the expense of safety." (Kitroeff, Gelles, & Nicas, 2019. p. 10). It is now known that Boeing employees questioned the design of the 737 Max and contended: "This airplane is designed by clowns, who are in turn supervised by monkeys" (Kitroeff, 2020).

**Andrew Wakefield's Fraudulent and Unethical Research on Vaccines Causes More Than 9,028 Deaths**

Some consider Andrew Wakefield among the most unethical researchers in history. He is most likely the father of the anti-vaccination movement (anti-vaxxers). In 1998, Wakefield published a paper in *Lancet* that demonstrated a causal link between the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine and autism combined with IBD (eventually, the paper was retracted). His sample consisted of 12 children, which is too small a test group to make such claims. It was later revealed by a journalist (Brian Deer) that Wakefield had a serious conflict of interest given that he was paid about \$700,000 by the lawyer working on a lawsuit against the firm that developed the MMR vaccine. It was later revealed that Wakefield had also applied for a patent to replace the MMR vaccine a few months before publishing his paper. Later, a former student asserted that Wakefield often ignored laboratory data. There were also questions as to how patients were recruited for the study. Deer ultimately demonstrated that Wakefield purposely manipulated the 1998 data published in his paper.

When the smoke cleared, Wakefield lost his license to practice medicine. In the name of profit, Wakefield's fraudulent research has resulted in at least 152,763 preventable illnesses and 9,028 deaths (Deer, 2020; Fraser, 2017).

**Sugar Association Sponsored Research is Responsible for an Obesity Epidemic and at Least 25,000 Deaths per Year in the United States**

According to the National Cancer Institute, adult American men consume an average of 24 teaspoons of added sugar per day (equal to 384 calories) (Harvard Health Publishing, 2022). People are more afraid of fat than sugar; this may be due to biased research conducted in the 1960s. John Hickson, then vice president and research director of The Sugar Association (known in the 1960s as the Sugar Research Foundation), sponsored three Harvard scientists in 1965 at the cost of \$6,500 (\$48,000 in 2016 dollars), who, in their review article slanted the negative results of their research that examined the causes of heart disease, from sugar to fat. Several published articles found evidence linking sugar consumption to heart disease. The researchers accomplished this by being selective in the research cited so that the role of saturated fat would be maximized and the part of sugar minimized (Bailey, 2016).

It is impossible to determine how much harm was caused by this deceitful research. According to one study, each year, sugary drinks are responsible for 184,000 deaths worldwide, including 25,000 deaths in the United States (Wanjek, 2015). These deaths result from heart disease, diabetes, and cancer and are strongly related to the consumption of sugary drinks such as soda, sports drinks, and fruit drinks (Wanjek, 2015). Coca-Cola is still spending vast amounts of money to fund researchers who are downplaying the role of sugary

drinks in causing obesity (O'Connor, 2016).

The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University has found that advertising sugary beverages to children has increased and has taken on new and innovative forms. Drinks loaded with sweeteners are marketed to convince parents that these drinks are healthy choices. The labels often stress that they contain vitamins or use words such as "natural" to suggest health. Companies use cartoon characters and funky names to promote sweetened drinks to children. Lower-income households are significantly more likely to purchase these sugary drinks than those from higher-income households, and Black and Latinx families are the target markets for these drinks (Fleming-Milici, 2021). Young people drinking sugar-filled beverages are more likely to become overweight adults hooked on sweet drinks.

### **High Drug Prices Will Result in 1.1 Million Medicare Patient Deaths by 2030**

Americans overpay for their health care but do not get much in return. In 2019, the United States ranked 35<sup>th</sup> in national health according to the Bloomberg Global Health Index (World Population Review, 2022). Other wealthy countries spend approximately 50% of what the United States spends on health per person (\$11,945 in 2020) (Wager, Oortaliza, & Cox, 2022). The high price of drugs is responsible for many deaths.

One of the biggest contributors to poor health, hospital admissions, higher health care costs, and preventable death is patients failing to take their medications as prescribed. Cost-related nonadherence is a significant and growing issue that is a direct result of runaway drug prices and a failure to implement policies and regulations that make drugs more affordable (Antrim, 2020, p. 6).

If Medicare could reduce drug prices by directly negotiating with drug companies, annual deaths would decrease by 94,000 (Antrim, 2020).

Several studies have found that the price of drugs in the United States may be anywhere from 2 to 4 times higher than in other countries. This is the result of allowing pharmaceutical companies to charge whatever they wish. To make matters worse, drug companies have several ways to suppress competition. Using "pay for delay" agreements, they pay manufacturers of generics to delay introducing competing, cheaper drugs for a period of time. They also make minor changes in order to establish new patents (called evergreening).

Another way drug companies demonstrate that they care more about profits than helping the sick is by introducing "me-too drugs" that provide few advantages over existing products. The sole purpose of these drugs is to increase profits for the manufacturer. It is estimated that 60% to 75% of all new medicines are me-too drugs. Add-on drugs are another way to increase profits without providing substantial benefits to patients. These are drugs added to other drugs to make them more effective. The problem arises when they are overpriced relative to the additional benefit provided (Waldrop, 2021).

One proposed solution to reduce the high cost of pharmaceuticals is to use value-based pricing. Several countries, including Germany and Australia, use this method to ensure that "the price of a drug is based on the benefit provided to patients in terms of quality of life or efficacy; this pricing approach makes their drugs cheaper and more valuable to the patients taking them." (Waldrop, 2021, para. 1).

Wendell Potter, a VP for corporate communications for a leading health insurer, came clean recently in an op-ed piece that the insurance industry was more concerned about profits than truth. The term "choice" used in healthcare was a public relations ploy to thwart attempts to reform the system and reduce the enormous profits of the health insurance companies. This



is why these firms are spending a great deal to confuse the public and make them believe that reforms mean less choice when the opposite is true (Potter, 2020).

### **Role of the Oil and Gas Industry in Spreading Climate Disinformation and Causing Five Million Deaths a Year**

Climate change causes five million extra deaths per year (Preidt, 2021). Who is to blame for this catastrophe? It is becoming evident that the oil and gas industry was aware of the dangers of climate change long before they acknowledged it. Exxon (now ExxonMobil) knew back in 1977 that fossil fuels contributed to climate change. The company did not make the public aware of the impending danger, and they promoted disinformation in the name of profit.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Exxon hired top experts to look into the climate change issues and even to study how much carbon dioxide would be absorbed by the oceans. The company developed sophisticated climate models and was aware of the effects of climate change. James Black, a senior scientist at Exxon, noted the following about climate change in the 1970s:

In the first place, there is general scientific agreement that the most likely manner in which mankind is influencing the global climate is through carbon dioxide release from the burning of fossil fuels... present thinking holds that man has a time window of five to 10 years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical (Hall, 2015, para. 3).

According to Hall (2015), Exxon became a leader in spreading misinformation about climate change. An Exxon executive was quoted as stating, "Victory will be achieved when the average person is uncertain about climate science" (p. 6). The company created the *Global Climate Coalition* to sow confusion and convince the public there was no reason to worry about climate change. Overall, the company spent \$30 million on think tanks to promote climate change denial (Hall, 2015). Exxon also used its political clout in 1998 to prevent the United States from signing the Kyoto Protocol, which aimed to reduce greenhouse gases.

From the mid-2000s through to the 2010s, ExxonMobil and other fossil-fuel companies gradually "evolved" their language, in the words of one ExxonMobil manager, from blatant climate denial to these more subtle and insidious forms of delayism. Another ExxonMobil manager described the effort by former company chairman and chief executive Rex Tillerson in the mid-2000s as an effort to "carefully reset" the company's profile on climate change so that it would be "more sustainable and less exposed." They did so by drawing straight from the tobacco industry's playbook of threading a very fine rhetorical needle, using language about climate change just strong enough to be able to deny that they haven't warned the public, but weak enough to exculpate them from charges of having marketed a deadly product (Supran cited in Powell, 2021, p 15).

If the fossil-fuel companies had been honest about the dangers of climate change back in 2000, greenhouse gas emissions would be a fraction of what it is today. Oil companies continue to deceive the public. They sell billions of dollars of oil fields and other polluting assets, so they can make claims about improving the climate and reaching future goals of net zero emissions. However, the oil wells are sold to companies that have no intention of combating climate change and are guilty of such practices as flaring (wasteful burning of excess gas) and thus harm the environment. Moving assets to another company has a positive

impact if the purchasing company signs an agreement to cut emissions from the purchased oil wells, not increase them (Tabuchi, 2022).

### **The 2013 Dhaka Garment Factory Collapse Killed More Than 1,100 Workers and Injured 2,600**

Bangladesh is one of the major manufacturers of cheap clothing, much of which is produced under hazardous working conditions such as overloaded and unsafe factory buildings. The clothing is made for large companies in the developed world. On April 24, 2013, the Dhaka garment factory collapsed, killing more than 1,100 workers and injuring another 2,600 people. It is the clothing industry's most terrible industrial accident (Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021). This was an accident waiting to happen. A day before the collapse, structural cracks were found in the building, and shops on the lower floors were immediately vacated. Unfortunately, the owners of the garment factories on the upper floors kept their employees working a day after an engineer found the building unsafe.

The Rana Plaza collapse called attention to the horrors of the global fashion business that employs 40 million of the poorest laborers in the world and makes them work in dangerous and debasing conditions. About 10% of these unfortunate workers are in Bangladesh. At least 29 global brands were identified as doing business with one or more of the five factories in the Rana Plaza building. After the accident, 222 companies signed the *Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh*, an agreement to ensure that employees in the garment industry worked in a safe workplace environment (Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021).

Although there have been some improvements since the Rana disaster, much remains to be done, and safety and labor issues continue in Bangladesh and other countries. Retailers benefit greatly from cheap labor, and manufacturers are afraid to make substantial improvements because this will increase the cost of the garment. Retailers claim they are fulfilling their obligations by only purchasing from manufacturers that abide by the abovementioned *Accord*. The truth is that most manufacturers are pretending to comply with the rules because they might lose the order if they raise prices. Meanwhile, the profit margins on a typical \$30 shirt made in Bangladesh are as follows: Workers get \$0.18 (.6%), the factory owner receives \$1.15 (about 4%), and the retailer receives \$17.70 (59%). Factory owners would be happy to spend more on improving pay and working conditions if buyers provide money for this and not pressure them to keep costs down. Retailers are to blame for the abysmal working conditions because they do not want to sacrifice any of their profits (Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021).

### **Medical Devices Have Caused More than 80,000 Deaths and 1.7 Million Injuries in the Past Decade**

Approximately 10% of Americans (32 million) have an implanted medical device. Medical devices designed to prevent or treat a disease within the human body, such as a pacemaker, must undergo the same FDA review process required for drugs. Devices permanently implanted in a person are difficult to extract if problems arise, making it all the more important for such devices to be regulated for safety. Unfortunately, many such medical devices are not appropriately vetted before being released to the public. These devices have been responsible for more than 80,000 deaths and 1.7 million injuries in the past decade. The reason for the medical device safety crisis is because there is little regulation of these products. There has been an attempt to pressure the FDA to regulate medical devices effectively (Salazar, 2021).

But thanks to regulatory loopholes and lax oversight, most medical devices are poorly vetted before their release into the marketplace and

poorly monitored after the fact...When trouble does arise, device makers often equivocate, regulators dither and patients seeking redress are forced into lengthy and expensive court battles. In the end, faulty products can remain on the market for years (Editorial Board, 2019, paras. 3, 4).

One example of a medical device that has turned out to be deadly – 80 have died as of 2018 – is the vaginal mesh, also known as the pelvic mesh. It was designed to stay in the body and hold pelvic organs in place. So far, there have been more than 100,000 patient claims that companies have paid \$8 billion to settle. Other medical devices that turned out to be dangerous include: Essure, a permanent birth control device injected into the fallopian tubes, made of metal coils that was found to be linked to 800 pregnancy losses and autoimmune disorders; the power morcellator designed to shred uterine tissue which was found to spread cancer; metal hips that released poisonous material; defibrillators that sent out electric shocks at random; artificial heart valves with short shelf lives; and robotic surgeons that maimed patients (Editorial Board, 2019).

There are several simple solutions that can improve outcomes. One problem is that the FDA agency responsible for monitoring medical devices, receives 35% of its revenue from the medical device industry. This results in a conflict of interest that encourages the agency to approve devices quickly. The last four people to head the agency, currently led by Dr. Jeffrey Shuren, found highly lucrative positions in the industry after leaving their job at the FDA. The medical device industry spent more than \$300 million in the decade ending in 2017 for lobbying. The industry also pays hospitals and doctors hundreds of million dollars in consulting fees. Finally, the industry itself should make the entire process of monitoring devices transparent and efficient by creating a global medical device registry to which doctors who see problems and patients experiencing issues should be able to report them so that they will become known immediately to all stakeholders (Editorial Board, 2019).

Medical devices with fatal design flaws but were sold anyway include the Guidant heart defibrillator, Medtronic Sprint Fidelis (a cable connecting defibrillators to a patient's heart), Bjork-Shiley heart valve, A.H. Robbins Dalkon Shield IUD, and G.D. Searle's Copper-7 IUD. Playtex super-absorbent tampons and Renu contact lens solution also had serious problems (American Association for Justice, n.d., pp. 4-8),

### **After Two Dam Collapses, a Third Vale Dam is in Danger of Rupturing; Death Toll Approximately 300**

Executive of the Brazil-based mining giant, Vale, were charged with negligence in the Brumadinho dam disaster that killed about 270 people on Jan. 25, 2019. This followed the 2015 collapse of a Vale Dam in Mariana, considered Brazil's worst environmental disaster. The retired Xingu dam is also at "serious and imminent risk of rupture." State prosecutors say Vale executives were aware of safety issues but did not correct the problems. They are being tried for murder because of the January 2019 disaster. In addition, communities devastated by the catastrophe are getting a \$7 billion payout (BBC News, 2021; Ennes, 2021).

There is evidence that Vale knew about significant problems with the dam in Brumadinho since November 2017 but did nothing to rectify the issues because they were concerned about its bottom line. In effect, the company placed profits before human lives and environmental safety.

It should be noted that dam failures have been known to occur, and it is therefore crucial for executives to continuously monitor the health of dams. On October 9, 1963, the Vajont dam failure created a 13 billion gallon tsunami that killed 2,056 people in Italy. It is 860 feet high and is one of the world's tallest dams (Mauney, n.d.).

### **Asbestos Industry Responsible for 230,000 Deaths Between 1979 and 2001**

As early as the 1930s, asbestos manufacturers knew the dangers of their product. A large number of asbestos workers were dying from asbestos-related causes. Despite this, the manufacturers covered up the hazards for over half a century. In one internal memo dated 1966, a company executive wrote, "If you have enjoyed a good life while working with asbestos products, why not die from it." (American Association for Justice, n.d., 25-26).

### **Menthol Cigarettes Responsible for 378,000 premature deaths in the United States between 1980 and 2018**

Menthol is a chemical compound that creates a cooling effect on the throat, reducing the harshness of cigarette smoke. It also restrains the coughing reflex, making it much easier and bearable to inhale cigarettes. It makes it considerably easier to start smoking and more challenging to quit. More than one-third of cigarette sales in the United States are menthol brands. Young people also prefer menthol over regular cigarettes (Truth Initiative, 2022; Wailoo, 2022). The tobacco industry promoted the false claim that menthol cigarettes were the healthful choice to African-American communities for decades. The industry also supported cultural events, politicians, and organizations in the Black community to gain support. Unsurprisingly, 85% of African-American smokers smoke menthol cigarettes vs. 30% of white smokers (Wailoo, 2022).

Public health groups have urged the FDA to ban menthol cigarettes for over a decade, and they are finally going ahead. The latest research demonstrates that "Menthol cigarettes were responsible for 10.1 million extra smokers, 3 million life years lost and 378,000 premature deaths between 1980 and 2018" (Truth Initiative, 2022, para. 12).

### **There were 345 "Active Shooter Incidents" in the U.S Between 2000 and 2020, Resulting in More than 1,024 Deaths**

In 2020, about 45,222 people died from gun-related injuries (24,292 from suicide and 19,384 from homicide) in the United States. The American gun culture is unique, and the estimated number of firearms per 100 residents (120.5) is the highest in the world (BBC News, 2022). To place the entire blame for gun-related injuries on corporations would be unfair. However, this paper will examine how one highly unethical company marketed weapons. Laws requiring strict background checks may be the government's responsibility, but companies should be reluctant to indiscriminately sell assault rifles to young people knowing the injury they may cause.

Daniel Defense manufactured the weapon used in the Uvalde, Texas elementary school shooting that resulted in the deaths of 19 children and two adults. Daniel Defense is a company known for aggressively marketing military-style assault weapons (similar to the AR-15) to young people. This company has used advertisements showing children carrying and firing guns. The company must have done a stellar job targeting young consumers. Salvador Ramos, the Uvalde shooter, bought his assault rifle directly from Daniel Defense a few days after his eighteenth birthday (Yaffe-Bellany & Silver-Greenberg, 2022). Evidently, this is a company that is more concerned with profits than protecting the lives of children.

Remington Arms, the manufacturer of the AR-15 style rifle used in the 2012 attack at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, agreed to pay \$73 million as part of a settlement to the families of nine of the victims. There were 27 victims, of which 20 were children. According to one of the plaintiffs, the company aggressively marketed its weapon in a way that "continued to exploit the fantasy of an all-conquering lone gunman,

proclaiming: 'Forces of opposition, bow down. You are single-handedly outnumbered.'" (Sorkin, 2022, para. 1).

Helen Steur, a victim of the April 12, 2022 subway shooting in New York City, is suing Glock, the manufacturer of the gun used in the attack that resulted in 30 people being wounded. The suit accuses the company of improper marketing of its product by stressing features that include ease of concealment and high capacity that appeal to those with criminal intent. Moreover, the company failed to "adopt the most basic policies and practices" to ensure that its guns did not end up in the wrong hands (Closson, 2022).

## Discussion

While the reason seemingly ethical people behave unethically is debatable, it is unquestionable that unscrupulous behavior emerges in a culture that encourages greed. The deaths referenced in this paper are largely a part of the profit equation established by corporate leaders. They reflect the culture of the organization and the operating systems in which they occur. Only a change to a culture that values life over profits can reduce or eliminate preventable deaths in these organizations. These cultures generally experience inertia and therefore need an external force to effect required changes. One such force is governments. They should enact laws and establish regulations that more effectively protect and reward whistle-blowers and impose imprisonment on corporate leaders who intentionally or through willful blindness cause preventable deaths in their companies. Punishing corporate leaders is consistent with the US Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United*, which ascribes first Amendment rights to the corporation. Those who speak for the corporation should be held accountable for the corporation's actions.

The American Association for Justice (n.d.) provides numerous additional examples where companies heartlessly marketed hazardous products to consumers.

Every day there is another recall or warning of a product that turned out to have design flaws or unexpected problems - a drug with an unanticipated side effect, a toy with a sharp piece that can injure a child, or a popular food product that may have been contaminated in production. These recalls and warnings are so frequent that consumers are no longer surprised. What would surprise consumers is the fact that sometimes those who are responsible for these dangers know about the problem and do nothing about it. People find it hard to believe that anybody would cover up a product's danger and then market that product to the very people it is likely to kill or injure (American Association for Justice, n.d., p. 3).

The fact that corporate executives so frequently make such callous decisions, and have always done so, shows the need for America's civil justice system. At a time when many advocate closing the courthouse doors, these stories give an indication of the dangers we would be exposed to without its protections. When government regulation can offer little more than a slap on the wrist and a small fine, the civil justice system is necessary to both detect such outrageous behavior and deter it in the future (p. 28).

There are indeed many situations where price tags must be placed on human life—regulatory agencies have no choice but to consider the value of human life as part of their work. Howard Steven Friedman, a prominent health economist and data scientist, has written about the issues involved in determining how much a human life is worth in his book, *Ultimate Price: The Value We Place on Life* (Friedman, 2020a). These "invisible prices"



affect health, safety, and various policies. Moreover, undervalued lives (e.g., elderly vs. young, poor vs. rich, or foreigners vs. Americans) will receive less protection and be exposed to greater risks.

No situation should exist where a court determines that someone's death does not merit damages since their death "saved money." No situation should exist where the death of one billionaire is deemed to be worth more than the deaths of a hundred people who earned much less. *No situation should exist where a company unnecessarily risks people's lives to save a few dollars.* No situation should exist where unequal valuing of human life leads to the denial of basic human rights (Friedman, 2020b, para. 22; italics added by authors).

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates what happens when uncontrolled greed wins out over consumer safety. Investigations of disasters that occur in companies invariably revealed that much of the malfeasances that led to the tragic event were known by people who were engaged in those activities or observed them. People should feel comfortable speaking up and reporting situations that may result in preventable deaths.

Johan Karlstrom, CEO of Skanska, has his company focus on the "five zeros: zero accidents, zero ethical breaches, zero environmental incidents, zero losing projects, and zero defects." He believes that business is not only about shareholder value but also about making the world a little bit better (Brzezinski, 2017). The paper posits that zero deaths from a company's products should also be a corporate goal. Millions of people have died or been injured because companies prioritized earnings over life.

Several organizations are working on instilling a sense of higher purpose into capitalism. They include Conscious Capitalism Organization, JUST Capital, Coalition for Inclusive Capitalism, and Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (Friedman & Mizrachi, 2021). Many investors are demanding metrics like ESG (environmental, social, and governance criteria) to see the impact of a company on all stakeholders –customers, employees, suppliers, communities, society, and the government. The Big Four accounting firms are working on new ESG standards that can become part of annual reports. Gallup is working with Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP) to get firms to use its ESG analytics tools to give capitalism a soul (Clifton, 2021). Some CEOs are motivated by social norms, want their firms to improve the world, and desire to provide employees with meaningful work. These leaders talk about focusing on the "triple bottom line" (TBL, or the three Ps): people, planet, and profits (Miller, 2020). The examples discussed in this paper demonstrate what can happen when companies ignore society's needs and focus only on profit.

Examples such as those presented here could easily be incorporated into any ethics course and vividly demonstrate the dangers of ignoring possible consequences to human life and society when morality is not prioritized. When there is too much pressure to focus on profits, corporate leaders are capable of ways where even human life is considered trivial. The corporate culture has to move away from maximizing shareholder value and consider the value of one life as boundless; no cost-benefit analysis can justify purposely selling a product or service that can harm any person. The Talmudic principle that "To save one life is tantamount to saving a whole world" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a) should be part of every company's mission statement. The two deadliest wars in American history were the Civil War (620,000 military fatalities) and World War II (405,399 military fatalities) (Statista, 2022). Deaths from corporate greed exceed these numbers by a large margin.

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