

The meningitis outbreak and health care for profit

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The deadly fungal meningitis outbreak in the US continues to spread. According to the latest figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 247 people in 15 states have been sickened in the outbreak, and the death toll has risen to 19. Health authorities expect these numbers to continue to rise.

Tens of thousands of people seeking relatively routine treatment for back pain now face the threat of contracting a deadly disease. All of those so far infected received injections of an apparently fungus-contaminated steroid medication made by a specialty compounding pharmacy in suburban Boston.

Meningitis is an inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. Those contracting the illness must receive months-long doses of intravenous anti-fungal medication, but the treatment is not fail-safe. Meningitis has a high fatality rate: close to 8 percent of those diagnosed in the present outbreak have died so far.

The CDC is in crisis mode, identifying the fungi involved, urging health care providers to notify all those at threat for infection so they can be monitored and receive treatment as needed as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the estimated 14,000 people who received the tainted injections must play an excruciating waiting game as they watch for signs of infection.

The public is rightly asking: How could such a health catastrophe occur in 21st century America? Who is responsible and how will they be held to account? What steps can be taken to avoid such an outbreak in the future? The answers to these questions go far beyond the very real emergency posed by the present outbreak. They point not only to the reckless and irresponsible actions of the businesses and government regulatory agencies involved, but to the operation of the health care system as a whole.

Much attention has focused on the operations of the New England Compounding Center (NECC), in Framingham, Massachusetts, which shipped the tainted drugs to some 75 clinics in 23 US states. NECC has shut down its operations and recalled the tainted injectable steroids, even as the safety of other drugs produced by the compounding pharmacy are questioned. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) raided the NECC facility on Wednesday.

There are an estimated 7,500 so-called compounding pharmacies in operation across the US. Theoretically, these compounders produce customized drugs to treat the specific needs of individual patients. As pharmacies, their operations are overseen by state pharmacy boards and not by the FDA, which regulates the drug industry.

In reality, however, many of these pharmacies operate like drug companies, producing medications in large quantities and distributing them nationwide. NECC was cited by the FDA and Massachusetts health authorities as far back as 2006 for violating safety standards and producing drugs without individual prescriptions, but the company was allowed to continue its operations and ultimately ship out the contaminated steroids.

The compounding pharmacy lobby has spent more than \$1 million over the past decade to beat back legislation that would set up an FDA advisory committee to oversee compounders. But these efforts to hamper oversight are only part of a far bigger campaign by the giant pharmaceuticals and insurance companies to ward off intervention by the federal government that might impede their profits, and to rush profitable drugs onto the market.

Numerous drugs that *have* received FDA approval have been responsible for countless deaths, disabilities and suffering. Merck & Co. received FDA approval in

1999 for the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug Rofecoxib, which it marketed under the brand names Vioxx, Coexx and Ceeoxx to treat arthritis.

Over 80 million people were prescribed the drug, bringing in \$2.5 billion in sales revenues for the drug giant. Merck withdrew the drug in 2004 after disclosures that it withheld information for five years about increased risk of heart attack and stroke associated with long-term usage. Between 88,000 and 140,000 people suffered serious heart disease as a result and the drug caused an estimated 60,000 deaths worldwide. While the Vioxx case is perhaps the most harrowing, there have been numerous others.

The day to day operation of the health care system in America is dominated not by the quest to heal and alleviate suffering, but to boost the profits, not only of the big drug makers, but the hospital chains and private insurance companies. The Obama administration-backed health care legislation—billed as an overhaul of the system that would extend coverage and improve access to care—is in fact aimed at slashing hundreds of billions from Medicare, and cutting costs for the government and corporations.

If the fungal meningitis outbreak has received zero attention in the presidential campaign it is because Barack Obama and his opponent Mitt Romney are in agreement with the underlying framework of society that makes such tragedies all but inevitable: the domination of the profit system over all aspects of social life. In the realm of health care—and the production of drugs in particular—this means that the health and well-being of the population are held hostage to profit interests, and patients can be prescribed contaminated drugs, or be the victims of other dangerous or deadly practices.

Both big business candidates are also champions of deregulation and, as such, opponents of any meaningful increase in oversight of the drug-making industry. The Obama administration has boasted of its efforts to eliminate “unnecessary” regulations on big business, going so far as to present such handouts to corporations as a key component of his “jobs program.” In fact, the cost of new government regulations in the first three years of the Obama administration was lower than in the last three years of the Bush administration.

At Tuesday’s presidential debate, Obama concluded with the following comment: “I believe that the free

enterprise system is the greatest engine of prosperity the world’s ever known. I believe in self-reliance and individual initiative and risk-takers being rewarded.”

Under Obama’s watch, this “engine of prosperity” has translated into huge bailouts for the banks, while millions face foreclosure, joblessness, and poverty. The “risk-takers” of BP were responsible for a catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, leading to the deaths of 11 oil rig workers, an environmental disaster, the destruction of people’s livelihoods, and the undermining of area residents’ health.

The meningitis outbreak points to the necessity of rejecting the politics of both big-business parties and their candidates, who defend the capitalist system and the interests of the corporate elite, regardless if this system threatens the very lives and welfare of the vast majority of the population.

As in all areas of social life, the Socialist Equality Party calls for a socialist overhaul of the health care system, and the reorganization of society on new, socialist foundations. This is the policy fought for by our candidates, Jerry White for president and Phyllis Scherrer for vice president, in the 2012 election.

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