How Merck Made a Killing

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Stockmarket pressure to find "blockbuster" drugs has forced drug companies to push products to market ever more aggressively. In the case of Merck's painkiller Vioxx, this had disastrous and lethal results.

There are two remarkable things about the painkiller Vioxx. One was its disastrous impact on those who took it. Before it was pulled from the market in September 2004, Vioxx probably did more harm than any other modern prescription medicine. Critics of the drug have estimated that up to 140,000 Americans suffered heart attacks or strokes and about a third died as a result of taking it—and that is not counting those who died in the other countries where the drug was sold. It was as if a full jumbo jet dropped from the sky every week for five years, yet no one noticed.

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