

# Prosecutor: Drug maker pushed OxyContin despite danger signs

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A member of the family that owns OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma told people at the prescription opioid painkiller's launch party in the 1990s that it would be "followed by a blizzard of prescriptions that will bury the competition," according to court documents filed Tuesday.

The details were made public in a case brought by Massachusetts

Attorney General Maura Healey that accuses Purdue Pharma, its executives and members of the Sackler family of deceiving patients and doctors about the risks of opioids and pushing prescribers to keep patients on the drug longer. The documents provide information about former Purdue Pharma President Richard Sackler's role in overseeing sales of OxyContin that hasn't been public before.

The drug and the closely held Connecticut company that sells it are at the center of a lawsuit in Massachusetts and hundreds of others across the country in which government entities are trying to find the drug industry responsible for an [opioid](#) crisis that killed 72,000 Americans in 2017. The Massachusetts litigation is separate from some 1,500 federal lawsuits filed by governments being overseen by a judge in Cleveland.

But the company documents at the heart of the Massachusetts allegations are also part of the evidence exchanged in those cases. While the Massachusetts filing describes their contents, the documents themselves have not been made public, at the company's request.

According to the filing, Richard Sackler, then senior vice president responsible for sales, told the audience at the launch party to imagine a series of natural disasters: an earthquake, volcanic eruption, hurricane and blizzard.

"The launch of OxyContin Tablets will be followed by a blizzard of prescriptions that will bury the competition. The prescription blizzard will be so deep, dense, and white," he said, according to the documents.

"Over the next twenty years, the Sacklers made Richard's boast come true," lawyers in the attorney general's office wrote. "They created a manmade disaster. Their blizzard of dangerous prescriptions buried children and parents and grandparents across Massachusetts, and the burials continue," they wrote.

The complaint says the Sackler family, which includes major donors to museums including the Smithsonian Institution, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Tate Modern in London, was long aware its drug was dangerous and addictive but pushed more sales anyway.

A memo among family members in 2008 warned of a "dangerous concentration of risk" for the family, the complaint says. Years earlier, Richard Sackler wrote in an email that the company would have to "hammer on the abusers in every way possible," describing them as "the culprits and the problem."

Joanne Peterson, who runs a Massachusetts-based support network for the [family members](#) of people addicted to drugs, said Sackler's comments show a "blatant disregard for human life."

"He certainly hammered them six feet under," Peterson said. "I've been to more funerals than I can count in the last 15 years."

Purdue Pharma accused the attorney general's office of cherry-picking from millions of emails and documents to create "biased and inaccurate characterizations" of the company and its executives. The company said in a statement said it will "aggressively defend against these misleading allegations."

The company also stresses that its drug is approved by federal regulators and prescribed by doctors; that it accounts for a small portion of opioids sold in the U.S.; and that illicit drugs including heroin and street fentanyl are causing most overdose deaths.

"In a rush to vilify a single manufacturer whose medicines represent less than two percent of opioid pain prescriptions rather than doing the hard work of trying to solve a complex public health crisis, the complaint

distorts critical facts and cynically conflates prescription opioid medications with illegal heroin and fentanyl," Purdue Pharma said.

Messages seeking comment were left with a spokeswoman for the Sackler family.

Massachusetts is the first state to personally name the company's executives in a complaint. It names 16 current and former executives and board members, including CEO Craig Landau, Richard Sackler and other members of the Sackler family.

A suit filed by the New York County of Suffolk also names members of the family. A lawyer who filed that suit, Paul Hanly, said he expects the family to be named in further suits.

Last year, Purdue halted efforts to market OxyContin to doctors.

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