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Drug money: No one lining up to return Sackler donations

By Paul Schott Updated 6:25 pm EST, Friday, February 1, 2019



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In this Aug. 17, 2018, file photo, family and friends who have lost loved ones to overdoses leave pill bottles in protest outside the downtown Stamford headquarters of OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma, which is ... [more](#)

STAMFORD — For decades, some of the country's leading universities, museums and hospitals have opened wings, halls and new buildings bearing the name Sackler.

But the shine has come off the letters embedded in all that marble and granite, as members of the Sackler family have become targets for a growing number of prosecutors and protesters pursuing their company, [Purdue Pharma](#).

Recently released documents in [lawsuits](#) filed by the attorneys general of Connecticut and Massachusetts accuse the Sacklers of fueling the nation's opioid crisis through relentless and deceptive marketing of Stamford-based Purdue's top-selling drug, OxyContin.

In turn, activists are piling pressure on recipients to disavow the family. But beneficiaries such as the [University of Connecticut](#), [Greenwich Hospital](#) and [Yale University](#) haven't renounced one of the country's most prolific philanthropic families, or their many millions.

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assert that eight family members, who control a majority of the company's board seats, have driven a concerted campaign to push sales of Purdue opioids.

At a launch party for OxyContin — which went on the market in 1996 — Richard Sackler predicted a “blizzard of prescriptions that will bury the competition,” according to the Massachusetts complaint. In addition to his board membership, he was a Purdue senior vice president at that time and later served as the company's CEO.

The Sacklers then allegedly directed thousands of sales-representative visits to doctors that distorted the drugs' risks and benefits and encouraged dangerous dosages.

In the coming years, Connecticut and Massachusetts — like the rest of the country — saw opioid-related deaths skyrocket, driven by escalating prescription-painkiller abuse. In Connecticut, 474 people died of heroin-related overdoses in 2017, compared with 174 in 2012, according to the state Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Addiction to the prescription painkillers fomented a surge in the use of heroin and other inexpensive and widely available street drugs.

Today, OxyContin generates most of Purdue's estimated annual sales of more than \$3 billion. Through the years, the Sackler defendants have paid themselves and their family billions of dollars from those opioid revenues, Massachusetts alleges.

Purdue said in a statement that Massachusetts' litigation is “littered with biased and inaccurate characterizations” and that the company and individual defendants — a list that also includes current Purdue CEO and President Craig Landau — would “aggressively defend against these misleading allegations.”

Meanwhile, the Manhattan-based [Simmons Hanly Conroy](#) law firm plans to add the Sacklers as defendants to about 250 lawsuits filed against Purdue by cities and counties that it represents. [In recent years](#), more than 1,000 cities and counties and about three-dozen states have sued Purdue as a company.

Major donors

Long before the legal barrage, the Sacklers had established themselves as philanthropic powerhouses. Their combined net worth has been estimated at [\\$13 billion](#).

The late Raymond Sackler — who bought Purdue's predecessor company in 1952 with brother Mortimer — and his wife, X

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Some \$3.1 million benefited the UConn School of Medicine, while another \$1.2 million supported the School of Fine Arts. Those contributions largely supported endowments to fund research, programming, student scholarships and faculty initiatives.

The couple also gave smaller amounts to other areas, including UConn's global affairs department and university libraries.

None of their donations related to research, teaching or programs focused on pain management covering opioids, UConn said.

All of their "substantial gifts" were made before 2012, according to the university. Raymond Sackler died in 2017, at the age of 97. A message left for a representative of Raymond and Beverly Sackler's side of the family was not returned.

Yale University is another major recipient. Its [Raymond and Beverly Sackler Institute for Biological, Physical and Engineering Sciences](#) focuses on research and teaching initiatives and hosts faculty specializing in arts and sciences, engineering and applied sciences, and medicine.

In the Sackler's longtime hometown of Greenwich, Greenwich Hospital houses the [Sackler Center for Pain Management](#). Its services focus on "alternative pain-management interventions," which do not include prescribing Purdue-made opioids, according to the hospital.

Raymond and Beverly Sackler's donations to the hospital date to 1991. Their support included a \$500,000 gift, according to the hospital's 2014 annual report.

Sackler family members are also prominent museum benefactors.

At The Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, the [Sackler Wing](#) houses the Temple of Dendur from ancient Egypt.

"The Sackler family has been connected with The Met for more than a half century," Daniel Weiss, The Met's president and CEO, said in a statement. "The family is a large, extended group, and their support of The Met began decades before the opioid crisis."

A few blocks up Fifth Avenue from The Met, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum houses the [Sackler Center for Arts Education](#).

In addition, several museums bear the name of the late Arthur Sackler, brother of Raymond Sackler.

His 1982 donation paid for the construction of the building that originally housed the [Arthur M. Sackler Museum](#) at Harvard, but his foundation does not fund the museum, the university said in a statement.

In Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian Institution's [Arthur M. Sackler Gallery](#) opened in 1987, following his 1982 donation of more than 1,000 works of Asian art and a \$4 million contribution toward construction of the center's building on the National Mall.

Arthur Sackler died in 1987. Alongside philanthropy, his major professional pursuits encompassed extensive scientific research and editing and publishing medical publications.

The widow and children of Arthur Sackler have said in recent statements that they have not financially benefited from

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In contrast with political organizations, such as the Connecticut Democratic Party, that have also received **major contributions** from the Sacklers, leaders of museums, universities and hospitals have appeared wary of distancing themselves from the family.

Allegations in the Massachusetts case are "deeply disturbing," said UConn spokeswoman Stephanie Reitz. But the university does not plan to give back any Sackler donations.

"Returning the money to the Sacklers would not undo the damage of the opioid crisis or punish the family or the company they are associated with," Reitz said. "Rather, it would hamper the work of UConn students and researchers who have no connection to the issues at hand and have done nothing wrong."

The university's decision on whether to accept more gifts from the Sacklers would "depend entirely on the donation's purpose (and) would need to be for a good and worthy cause," Reitz said.

State Sen. **Tony Hwang**, R-Fairfield, agreed with UConn's decision to keep the money because he said he was satisfied with the university's explanation that it had not used the funds to support opioids. But the co-ranking member of the Legislature's Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee would not support the university taking additional donations from the family.

"By not accepting any future money from the Sacklers and their foundations moving forward, UConn has an opportunity to send a powerful statement in joining the fight against the opioid crisis," Hwang said.

State Sen. **Will Haskell**, D-Westport, co-chair of the Higher Education panel, also called for greater scrutiny of the university's ties to the Sacklers.

"The truth of the matter is that Purdue Pharma misled and exploited both patients and doctors, contributing greatly to the prescription-drug crisis that now plagues so many Connecticut residents," Haskell said in a statement. "I believe the university should strongly consider its continued relationship with the Sackler family, including renaming buildings and awards that bear the Sackler name."

Other organizations that have taken Sackler dollars are less direct than UConn in answering questions about the family's largesse. But none are primed to return contributions or rename Sackler buildings or programs.

"We appreciate the current issues surrounding the Sackler family, and we are reviewing the nature of the gifts and the use of those funds," Dana Marnane, Greenwich Hospital's vice president of public relations, said in a statement.

The Met is "engaging in a further review of our detailed gift-acceptance policies, and we will have more to report in due course," Weiss, the CEO and president, added in his statement.

And Smithsonian officials said in a statement that they "give careful consideration to the process of naming." The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery would keep its name "in perpetuity," according to the donation agreement.

Messages left for a Yale spokeswoman were not returned. But University President Peter Salovey told the **Yale Daily News** in 2017 that "generosity from the Sackler family has funded issues core to Yale's mission."

The Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming at Yale — formed as the university was debating whether to rename a college named for 19th-century U.S. Vice President and slavery proponent John Calhoun (it did), issued a document in 2017

that stated: "the presumption against renaming is at its strongest when a building has been named for someone who m X

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At an [Aug. 17 demonstration](#) outside Purdue's headquarters at 201 Tresser Blvd., protesters deposited pill containers in front of the main entrance. The capsule labels listed the Sacklers as the prescriber, with a warning of "extremely addictive, will kill" and an Rx number of "200,000 dead," referring to estimates of opioid-related deaths in the past 20 years.

"I don't think, at the time, these institutions were aware of the blood Purdue had on their hands, but they certainly are now and should stop taking any money in the future," said Cheryl Juairé, of Marlborough, Mass., who organized the Aug. 17 event. "And we will fight these institutions that don't make this happen."

A few weeks earlier, activists scattered pill bottles and held banners that read "Shame on Sackler" during a [protest](#) at the Sackler Museum at Harvard.

Similar demonstrations have also taken place in the past year at [The Met](#) and the Smithsonian's [Sackler Gallery](#).

"When you have long-standing supporters who have helped build impressive and exciting programs for the public, institutions probably aren't going to denounce the family," said the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy's Fortunato. "At the same time, nobody wants bad publicity, so these organizations are going to have to be more careful going forward."

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