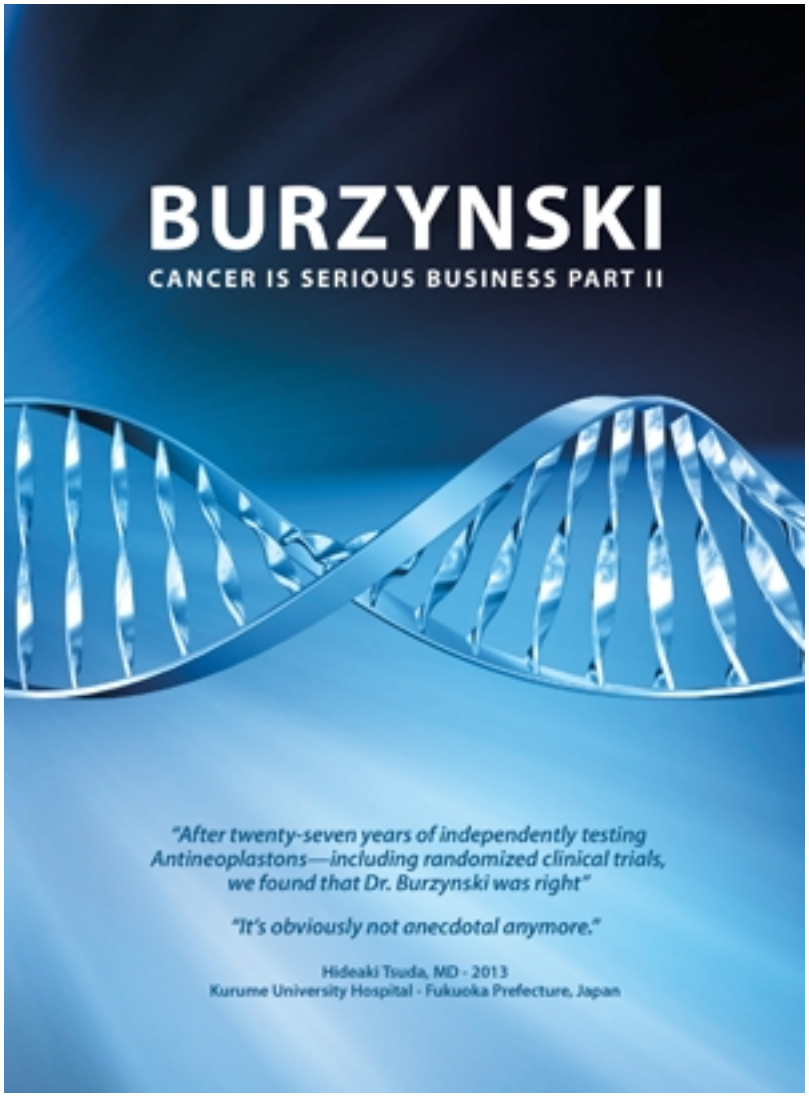

I saw director Eric Merola's new documentary *Burzynski: Cancer is Serious Business, Part II*. I wish I could take the film as seriously as I take the lives and livelihoods of cancer patients.

Dr. Stanislaw Burzynski operates the Burzynski Clinic, a cancer treatment center in Houston, Texas. Dr. Burzynski claims to have discovered a deficiency of peptides he calls "antineoplastons" in many cancer-afflicted people. Since the mid-'90s, he's conducted a series of clinical trials hoping to cure cancer by administering these antineoplastons to patients.

Many doctors, scientists, and public health advocates have criticized Dr. Burzynski for not publishing any randomized, controlled trial results in peer-reviewed medical journals. The FDA admonished the Burzynski Clinic for advertising its unproven therapies as effective cancer cures. Antineoplaston treatments are also very expensive,

often costing patients $7,000 to $9,500 per month for several months of therapy
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Burzynski: Cancer is Serious Business, Part II (hereafter abbreviated to *Burzynski II*) takes a three-pronged approach to defending the clinic and its methods. First, Merola interviews several cancer victims who seem to have come away from the Burzynski Clinic with positive results after mainstream oncologists told them they had only weeks or months to live. Second, *Burzynski II*
blames Dr. Burzynski's inability to establish a foothold for his experimental treatments in the medical establishment on pharmaceutical companies who have taken over the FDA. According to the film, the FDA is a corrupt organization willing to suppress any breakthrough cancer treatment that may be less profitable than established drugs, surgeries, chemotherapies, and radiation. Finally, Merola paints the clinic's public and private critics as an organized cabal of evil schemers who delight in the deaths of cancer victims.

For very good reason, the film devotes most of its running time to letting Dr. Burzynski's grateful patients speak for themselves. We hear from a young woman in the U.K. who went to the Burzynski Clinic after her local doctor gave her an especially grim diagnosis. We hear from a parent whose daughter is still alive years after oncologists told their family she should have died. Some of these patients are well known among Dr. Burzynski's critics for spearheading high-profile fundraising drives and for being vocal supporters of the clinic. Their stories may be anecdotal. They may not add up to a statistically significant picture of Dr. Burzynski's success. But they are undeniably powerful, both to those of us who have lost friends and family to cancer and those of us who have experienced the elation of beating the disease. If these people faced certain death before visiting the Burzynski Clinic and came back with hope, I can't blame them at all for wanting to trumpet the doctor they credit with saving their lives.

One of these patients says constant missives from Dr. Burzynski's critics warning her against the treatment added unwarranted stress to her life. To back this up, Merola shows a Twitter screen grab of one skeptic accusing this patient's fundraising effort of being a money laundering effort on behalf of Dr. Burzynski. When asked if she has a message for these skeptics, the patient says her message would be "fuck off". The film festival audience with whom I saw the movie cheered this line. It brought a sympathetic smile to my face as well.

If patients go public with their beliefs about the Burzynski Clinic's effectiveness, those beliefs should be held to scrutiny. It's not unreasonable for a fair-minded skeptic to question whether these stories amount to compelling evidence for Dr. Burzynski's claims. So far, I've not been convinced by any of them. But there's a line between scrutinizing a patient's claims and

attacking a patient in a way that makes her feel stupid or complicit in a medical scam. This is a fundamental problem with advocating on behalf of those who may not feel that your advocacy is in their best interest. I don't have an easy answer for how this kind of situation should be handled. But as some of the patients featured in this film are still undergoing treatment and facing an uncertain future, I've decided not to mention their names here.

Burzynski II's accusation that the pharmaceutical industry has bought and paid for the FDA is a bit easier to manage. Merola offers very little evidence to back this up beyond a lengthy excerpt from an episode of PBS' journalism series Now, which explores the FDA's vulnerability to financial interests as a regulatory body. Like anything else in politics, corruption at the FDA whether in favor of the pharmaceutical industry or anyone else is a real possibility. But Merola doesn't make a convincing case as to whether the FDA has unfairly intervened in Dr. Burzynski's research. In fact, it seems to me that the FDA's granting Dr. Burzynski permission to conduct clinical trials of antineoplaston therapy in the first place has afforded the Burzynski Clinic a huge share of its credibility with supporters.

Merola isn't the first to make the argument that suppressing newer, cheaper cancer breakthroughs would be in the financial interest of hospitals and drug companies that make huge amounts of money from conventional treatments. But antineoplaston therapy only constitutes a small percentage of the Burzynski Clinic's overall practice. The majority of Dr. Burzynski's patients receive what the clinic calls "personalized treatment". This amounts to a cocktail of drugs Dr. Burzynski prescribes off-label based on what he claims is a careful analysis of an individual patient's unique needs. I'm confused as to why the pharmaceutical industry would then want to shut down a clinic where the vast majority of patients receive drugs that very industry produces.

The silliest part of *Burzynski II* concerns its treatment of what Merola terms "The Skeptics". The film doesn't mention any of Dr. Burzynski's critics by name, but numerous tweets and blog posts are shown as evidence that the Burzynski Clinic opposition is organized and ruthless. The bulk of this attention is directed at the people behind The OTHER Burzynski Patient Group, a blog seeking to counter positive anecdotes with true stories of people who have died after receiving treatment at the clinic.

Merola's depiction of the larger skeptical community is over-the-top to the point of absurdity. Imagine the transparent, often hilarious methods politicians use in their attack ads to paint opponents as monsters. We see all of that in *Burzynski II*. Skeptics' faces are blurred, their voices are changed, and whenever they appear on screen, the background music turns

instantly, cartoonishly malevolent. Footage of Burzynski Clinic critics comes from this episode of the Google Hangout show *Virtual Skeptics*. This is a freely available show that anyone can find on YouTube. However, Merola captions the footage as a skeptics' "video conference" that he acquired. I thought maybe he intentionally worded this to appear as though he somehow obtained video of a secret meeting. If so, this tactic seems to have worked on at least one audience member who questioned Merola with a sort of conspiratorial glee during the Q&A about how he obtained this footage. Again, it's on YouTube. Anyone can watch it.

Merola uses another manipulative trick when he singles out one skeptic's tweet mentioning bringing Dr. Burzynski a gift on the doctor's birthday. From the blurred contact information and the devilish music, you would be forgiven for reading some malicious double entendre into this tweet. The movie never mentions, however, that this "gift" was a challenge for Dr. Burzynski to match a donation to the St. Jude cancer care center. Far from a threat, this "gift" was a huge act of kindness on the part of concerned skeptics.

I came away from *Burzynski II* willing to believe that Merola and the various Burzynski Clinic supporters featured in the film have their hearts in the right place. If they genuinely believe people are trying to suppress a breakthrough cancer cure, it makes sense that they would fight on Dr. Burzynski's behalf as aggressively as possible. However, this documentary has failed to convince me that what we're seeing with the Burzynski Clinic isn't a doctor who simply has not been able to prove his bold claims. After so many years, this should not be the case.

So, until presented with more compelling evidence than *Burzynski II*, I remain skeptical.

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