

“Are you in the group of people whose lives could be saved by viewing *Taken as Directed*?”

Viewing *Taken as Directed* could save your life.

It could if you're among the eight million Americans who travel each year to countries where it makes sense to take an anti-malaria drug. You know who you are: business travelers, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, government employees, members of the armed forces and tourists. If you're part of this in crowd, keep reading.

Maybe it's just me, but when I happen upon a situation where serious wrong is being done with alacrity, I'm inclined to want to rip the wrongdoers' hearts out, and then stomp them into the ground. In this particular case, drug maker Roche Pharmaceuticals, the US Army, and the FDA deserve this treatment, because as you'll learn from this film, they all have known for years about the problems caused by the anti-malaria drug Lariam (mefloquine). Problems they've chosen to ignore.

The film ends with an almost benign on-screen note saying that despite conclusive clinical trials indicating up to 40% of individuals taking Lariam will have serious neuro-psychiatric side effects—ranging from merely going temporarily nuts to committing homicide and/or suicide—the drug is still on the market. At that point, I wanted to scream in both anguish and rage.

But wait, as they say, there's more. Not only is Lariam still on the market, the government agency that doctors rely on for prescribing advice for travel medications, the CDC, still recommends it as a malaria preventative without shouting the warnings on its web-site in 72-point bold-faced, blood red type. It's more like, “mumble, mumble, mumble, serious side effects, mumble, mumble, mumble, ask your doctor, mumble.”

You can't watch this film and come away with the belief that taking even one Lariam pill as directed is a sane act. In the interest of fairness and balance, the producers did interview one doctor who

specializes in travel medicine who endorses the drug as an effective prophylactic medication. I just wished he'd been asked on camera if he would recommend that his children or grandchildren take it before going on safari—or would he have suggested an alternative medication?

As a specific warning about Lariam, *Taken as Directed* works well. It also works, however much more subtly, as an exemplar for the fact that drug companies hold too much sway over the approval process for new drugs, and that the US Food and Drug Administration appears not to be terribly concerned about that problem, although viewers will have to do considerable reading between the lines to get that message.

And if you're wondering why this reviewer is so pissed off about the government's complicity in the Lariam scandal, it's because there but for the grace of God go I. When I was embedded with Air Force pararescue units in Afghanistan to write my book *None Braver*, I took nine Lariam tablets that were prescribed for me without any accompanying information about the potentially devastating side effects. And since it was my doctor who told me to take the drug, I foolishly didn't ask the questions I should have asked. When you watch *Taken as Directed* and realize that for some patients, just three pills destroyed their lives, you can understand my anger.

So spend a few bucks, buy the DVD, watch the film, and use your head.

Michael Hirsh

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