
Bacteriophage and the American Pharmaceutical Industry

Carolyn Farnsworth*¹

¹University of South Carolina (USC) – United States

Abstract

The growing number of antibiotic-resistant microbial infections poses a serious threat to the future efficacy of antibiotic treatments. Around the world, news media and scientific articles alike warn their audiences of this potentially disastrous situation, and call for the speedy development of antibiotic alternatives. One such alternative, phage therapy, has received considerable attention in recent years. Largely developed and extensively practiced in the former Soviet Union (notably at the Eliava Institute in the Republic of Georgia), phage therapy is widely presented as archetypical of a long-overlooked Eastern European approach to science and therefore as a novelty to Western biomedicine. However, phage therapy is neither a recently revolutionary concept nor a treatment historically unknown to Western nations. Prior to the 1940s antibiotic revolution, several prominent American pharmaceutical companies produced and marketed phage products. These products gradually disappeared from the American pharmacopeia, an observation that cursory analyses dismiss as the inevitable consequence of inadequate research and premature production on the part of phage manufacturers. On the contrary, this paper presents a more complex story of the short-lived American phage industry, analyzing the pharmaceutical publications of Eli Lilly & Co. and E.R. Squibb & Sons-and considering in turn contemporaneous scientific articles, as well as archival documents from the Eliava Institute. As scientists, medical practitioners, and drug manufacturers today endeavor to fortify our antimicrobial armament, examining the history of pharmaceutical endeavors will allow for a more informed approach to the development and implementation of strategies to combat infectious disease.

*Speaker