

# Monopolies, Oligopolies, and Senior Citizens



It is said that monopolies (control of the market by a single entity) and oligopolies (control of the market by a few entities) are ungood. This is because with limited or no competition, the producers of the good or service will not have the stimulus to be price competitive, innovative, or to offer a wide selection of merchandise. To put it bluntly, bad service at high prices.

All you have to do is to look at those areas administered by the government, a monopoly, to appreciate the logic in this. Education, health care, and the military are good examples, but little stuff like licensing (drivers licenses, gun permits, and even tags for your pets) are other examples of pathetic offerings to the user. Our government even admits this, and seeks privatization to provide improved services at a lesser price. A monopoly ought to be able to provide the lowest prices, particularly when there's no profit motive and the welfare of the citizen is of primary concern, but apparently in the case of government monopolies, nothing seems to work effectively.

The government, it is said, is like a shotgun without a firing pin. It won't work, and you can't fire it.

OK, fine. Lots of people would agree that monopolies and oligopolies aren't the ideal circumstance. But what about the down side of unfettered competition? I went to buy some hay fever pills in the drugstore. Many pharmaceutical companies make these things. It's a free market because they don't have their twelve year exclusivity (or whatever it is) on pills for this malady. There was selection of package sizes; a packet of six, of twelve, of eighteen, of twenty, of twenty-four, of thirty, and of (gasp) thirty six. I don't know why a person needs such a wide selection, but that's unfettered competition for you. To complicate matters, these various sized packages of pills came in 12 hour dosages and 24 hour dosages. Is the price of a 12 hour dosage one-half that of a 24 hour dosage? Of course not. This is getting complicated, I thought. Whoops! There are regular strength and extra strength to further add to the mix.

That's when I griped to the pharmacist in my old

man, petulant, whiny, irritated voice. "You there! Mr. pharmacist! Whatn'hell are all these packages? Why don't your labels price by the pill? Get on out here and tell me what's the best buy." He did, and was nice about it (Clairitin had a special two for one coupon), but that's what selection does for you. It creates confusion, especially in the aged.

I like old people. Frankly, I never cared much for old people until I became one. I thought they were short of temper, opinionated, and dressed funny. Young people call us oldsters Q-Tips.... white shoes and white hair. Jeez.

I saw a tee shirt that had this on it: "Senior. Gimme my damn discount", an allusion to the famed "seniors discount" and to the short-tempered curmudgeonly manner of oldsters. The thing is, I don't know why we deserve a discount. Kids need a discount more. They have no money at all. Young families paying off the mortgage and the car while raising three little ankle biters need a discount too, because they have a little bit of money but way too many places to spend it.

"Oh", you say, "but seniors are on a fixed income". Who isn't? I don't remember telling the boss, "I spent a little rashly this month. Squandered the old paycheck. Tell you what, why don't you just give me more money." All but the richest of us are on a fixed income for heaven's sake.

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