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How Misuse of a Single Paragraph Ended Up Killing 60,000 Americans Per Year

By Dr. Mercola | June 21st, 2017

Opioid addiction is at an all-time high in the U.S., and according to many addiction specialists, pain and hopelessness are primary drivers of this burgeoning crisis. Limiting the availability of opioids and making overdose-reversal drugs and treatment for drug addiction more readily available are part of the answer. But it's not enough.

We have to take a much deeper look at the root of the problem. What is causing all this physical pain and emotional distress in the first place? Clearly, the U.S. health care system is grossly ineffective when it comes to addressing chronic health problems. Whether pain is promoting hopelessness or the other way around is difficult to ascertain, but the two appear to be closely intertwined and need to be addressed together.

Somehow or another, we need to refocus our efforts to create lives worth living, and improve access to and information about basic disease prevention, which begins with diet and basic lifestyle choices — the kind of information I've focused on with my newsletter and website.

That said, it's worth looking at how use of prescription opioids ended up getting so out of control. Doing so will reveal an oft-ignored truth: Drug companies may, and often do, promote drugs that do more harm than good. After all, drugs are profit centers, and drug companies are first and foremost beholden to their shareholders — not patients — who expect to make a decent profit from their investments.

To maximize sales, drug companies may hide information, misinform and/or outright lie about their medicines, and this is precisely what happened with narcotic painkillers.

Drug Companies Latched on to Evidence That Wasn't

In the years to come, this letter to the editor (most letters do not undergo any kind of peer-review) became an oft-cited piece of evidence used by drug companies and pain specialists alike. In all, it's been cited more than 600 times since its publication, serving as the basis of misleading and inaccurate statements such as: "[P]ain population with no abuse history is literally at no risk for addiction," and "There have been studies suggesting that addiction rarely evolves in the setting of painful conditions."

A remarkable 80 percent of the articles citing Jick's letter failed to include the facts that his data pertained specifically to hospitalized patients receiving the drugs on a short-term basis. You simply cannot assume that because a narcotic is safe to use in the short term under careful monitoring by hospital staff, it will be safe long-term, and without careful monitoring.

According to Juurlink, "It's difficult to overstate the role of this letter. It was the key bit of literature that helped the opiate manufacturers convince front-line doctors that addiction is not a concern."

Purdue Pharma used it as the basis for its claim that opioid addiction affects less than 1 percent of patients

treated with the drugs. In a recent interview with The Associated Press (AP),⁶ Jick said he was “mortified that that letter to the editor was used as an excuse to do what these drug companies did.” He also clarified that his letter “only referred to people getting opioids in the hospital for a short period of time and has no bearing on long-term outpatient use.”

60,000 Americans Overdosed in 2016

Opioid addiction and accidental overdoses are now taking a tremendous toll. According to U.S. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death among Americans under the age of 50! In 2015, more than 52,000 Americans died from some form of drug overdose; 33,000 of them involved some form of opioid.

Preliminary data for 2016 reveals that death toll is anywhere from 59,000 to 65,000. That’s a 19 percent increase in one year, and the largest annual increase of drug overdose deaths in U.S. history. Between 2014 and 2015, drug overdose deaths rose by 11 percent. The most common drugs involved in prescription opioid overdose deaths include methadone, oxycodone (such as OxyContin®) and hydrocodone (such as Vicodin®).

Synthetic opioids like fentanyl are also being abused by a rising number of people. A recent article in The New York Times highlights the tragedy of Grant Seaver and Ryan Ainsworth, two 13-year-olds who died after taking the synthetic opioid U-47700, also known as “pinky.” They got the drug from a teenage friend who had bought it on the dark web using bitcoin.

The sheer potency of synthetic opioids make them ideal for mailing. A standard envelope can hold enough fentanyl to get 50,000 people high. And, while the dark web marketplace Silk Road was shut down in 2013, others have popped up in its place, allowing people who might otherwise not have access to narcotics get them through the mail.

Disturbingly, rising fentanyl addiction also poses novel risks to first responders, law enforcement and even drug-sniffing dogs. The drug is so potent (anywhere from 500 to 1,000 percent more potent than morphine) that inhaling just a few flakes can be lethal.

Other Opioid Facts and Statistics

To truly understand the enormity of America’s drug problem, consider the following:

Drug overdoses are the ninth leading cause of death in the U.S.

In 2015, 52,404 Americans died from drug overdoses; 33,091 of them involved an opioid and nearly one-third of them, 15,281, of them were by prescription. Meanwhile, kidney disease, listed as the ninth leading cause of death on the CDC’s top 10 list, killed 48,146.

The CDC does not include drug overdoses on this list, but if you did, drug overdoses (63 percent of which are opioids), would replace kidney disease as the ninth leading cause of death as of 2015, inching its way toward the eighth slot, currently occupied by respiratory complications such as pneumonia, which took 55,227 lives in 2015. As noted earlier, in the 50-and-younger demographic, drug overdoses are now the No. 1 cause of death.

Opioid use has overtaken smoking

More Americans now use prescription opioids than smoke cigarettes. One in 4 Americans (and 1 in 3 millennials) reports knowing someone addicted to opioids.

Opioids kill more Americans than car crashes

In 2014, prescription drug overdoses, a majority of which involved some type of opioid, killed more Americans than car crashes (49,714 compared to 32,675). This held true for 2015 as well, despite 2015

being hailed as the deadliest driving year since 2008. In all, 38,300 Americans died in car crashes in 2015 — a sharp rise thought to be related to a combination of cheaper gas prices and hence increased travel, and using smartphones while driving.

Drugged driving causes more fatal crashes than drunk driving

Driving under the influence of opioids and other drugs has become a serious problem, now causing more fatal car crashes than drunk driving. Prescription and/or illegal drugs were involved in 43 percent of fatal car crashes in 2015, while 37 percent involved illegal amounts of alcohol.

Opioids, specifically, can increase your risk of being involved in a car crash by a factor of 10, having a relative car crash risk between 2 and 10. (A driver with no drugs or alcohol in their system has a relative crash risk of 1.)

Americans use 80 percent of global opioid supply

Prescriptions for opioid painkillers rose by 300 percent between 2000 and 2009, and Americans now use 80 percent of all the opioids sold worldwide. In Alabama, which has the highest opioid prescription rate in the U.S., 143 prescriptions are written for every 100 people.

Financial cost of opioid addiction tops \$193 billion annually

Addiction to opioids and heroin now costs the U.S. more than \$193 billion each year.

Prenatal exposure is rampant

Despite carrying risks of pregnancy-related problems and birth defects, nearly one-third of American women of childbearing age are prescribed opioid painkillers and more than 14 percent of pregnant women were prescribed opioids during their pregnancy.

Addiction affects more than 1 in 4 opioid users

Studies show addiction affects about 26 percent of those using opioids for chronic non-cancer pain, and 1 in 550 patients on opioid therapy die from opioid-related causes within 2.5 years of their first prescription.

Opioid addiction has lowered life expectancy in U.S.

According to the latest data from the National Center for Health Statistics, life expectancy for both men and women dropped between 2014 and 2015, for the first time in two decades, and overdose deaths appear to be a significant contributor.

Prescription painkillers are the No. 1 gateway to heroin

OxyContin and other opioid pain killers have been identified as the primary gateway drugs to heroin. Chemically, these drugs are very similar and provide a similar kind of high. According to a 2013 U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration report, nearly 80 percent of people who use heroin have previously used prescription painkillers.

Opioid use and addiction found to have lifelong health ramifications

According to Dr. Scott Krakower, assistant unit chief for psychiatry at Zucker Hillside Hospital in New York, opioids cause changes in your brain that can increase your risk of depression, and the effects may be "long-lasting or even permanent."

Opiates depress your central nervous system and slow the electrical activity in your brain, which can result in circadian rhythm disruptions, mood changes and cognitive decline. Opiate use also promotes bowel dysfunction, endocrine system (hormonal) problems, sexual dysfunction, reduced fertility, reduced testosterone levels in men and bone disorders.