

ENDING THE EPIDEMIC

Florida's Opioid Crisis and America's Fight Against Overdose Deaths

A Pumphrey Law Scholarship Essay by Evan Mizerak

Prompt: *Florida has been enduring an opioid crisis over the past decade. How do you propose we raise awareness and try and prevent death and abuse from opioid addiction? (800-1,000 words)*

The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) is among the most prestigious peer-reviewed scientific publications in the world, and readers consequently take its articles unhesitatingly as fact. In 1980, a 101-word letter to the editor was published in the journal by Jane Porter and Hershel Jick with the title *Addiction Rare in Patients Treated With Narcotics*. Using methodologically unsound data collected exclusively from patients who had been treated with opioids in a hospital setting, it stressed that addiction from such medications was uncommon. Scientists began citing the letter frequently, pointing to it in defense of opioid use at home.

Nearly four decades later, opioids are killing 16 people per day in the state of Florida.¹

What's perhaps even more concerning for the Sunshine State is that the thread of opioid-related deaths is worsening at a rapidly accelerating clip: they jumped over 35% between 2015 and 2016 alone on a statewide basis, and in Orange County, they increased over 70% in a three-year period.² Such disturbing trends are unfortunately reflective of the larger-scale opioid epidemic in the United States. Consuming more opioids per day than any country in the world, the US has found itself completely entrenched in an eruption of addiction and misuse that culminated in nearly 43,000 overdose deaths and \$504 billion in economic costs *in 2016 alone*.³ The opioid crisis is accompanied by far-reaching consequences aside from its sheer death toll and monetary implications. For example, the epidemic has taken a quantifiable toll on children - Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) has spiked at a historic rate in newborns, primarily due to exposure to opioids including prescription painkillers and heroin prior to birth. Furthermore, the sizable drop in the male labor force has been attributed to opioid prescription increases, as have spikes in premature mortality in heartland states.⁴

In order to prevent further socioeconomic damage in both Florida and the country at large, a number of aggressive steps are necessary. Being that the threat posed by the opioid epidemic is wholly unique in magnitude, there is little room for error and, as I see it, educational efforts should reflect the uniqueness of the circumstances. Something to keep in mind is that, unlike many tragedies which spontaneously befall an unsuspecting population and cannot be blamed on any singular group of people, the opioid crisis has been irrevocably exacerbated by the dishonesty and exploitation of pharmaceutical industries. This was never clearer than this past May, when Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi announced that she was bringing a lawsuit against opioid drugmakers for their role in fueling the epidemic that has claimed the lives of so many in her state. Unfortunately, we've seen these efforts fall flat before.

Take 2008, for example. McKesson Pharmaceutical was accused by the DEA of failing to report suspicious orders from online pharmaceutical outlets. Agreeing to establish a monitoring system, the company accepted a fine of nearly \$14 million. Just five years later, the DEA opened an investigation into McKesson's failure to adequately control the diversion of opioids. In January of 2017, they were hit with another fine, this time for a record \$150 million. The takeaway lesson? Companies with market caps of 26 billion dollars *simply don't learn*. The failure of Florida's leaders to rectify the damage done by the irresponsibility of drug companies has not come about due to a lack of trying. Therefore, I would suggest that awareness and prevention efforts be preceded by newly-molded, zero-tolerance policies instituted at the governmental level that would cripple companies whose negligence contributes to the senseless deaths of tens of thousands of Floridians and other Americans.

At this point, attention can be turned to the education of young people about correct use of medicine, proper disposal of unused medicine, and ways to prevent addiction and abuse in friends and family. In-school seminars are dependably efficient ways to accomplish this goal, as attendance is required and presentations can be held in a controlled environment. Beyond this, awareness can be raised by the augmentation of prescription drug monitoring programs (PDMPs). A study at Brandeis University demonstrated that 91% of physicians in states including Rhode Island, Connecticut, and California indicated that the effectiveness of enhanced PDMPs in maintaining patient care was good to excellent.⁵ Finally, heightened awareness should logically come with increased allocation of resources to STEM-based programs with the goal of developing novel addiction and abuse deterrent medications. With a more robust scientific effort geared toward counteracting the effects of a trend that has been such a detriment to Florida, the state could be confident that it would see a dip in addiction rates.

The prevention of death and abuse of opioids in Florida and beyond will require similarly pointed efforts, but the good news is that promising plans are already in motion. In March, Florida governor Rick Scott signed legislation into law that places tough limits on painkiller prescriptions and provides significant resources to treatment programs.⁶ This legislation is a start, but I would also personally be a proponent of focusing on the expansion of treatment options and capacity. Recovery centers are a large part of intervention in would-be opioid-related deaths, so prioritizing accessibility is integral. Finally, prescribers must be vigilant concerning the addictive properties of any medicine they distribute, especially in a world that sees pharmaceutical companies loath to be truthful. Distribution should be limited to instances of acute pain, and cognizance of a patient's addictive history is of enormous importance.

The road to recovery from the opioid crisis will not be a brief one, nor will it be easy. However, with a regimented process that confronts corruption in the pharmaceutical industry, enhances methodology geared toward responsible prescription, and expands treatment options, I am confident that Florida will overcome the crisis with which it is confronted - and the nation will undoubtedly follow suit. Before long, the harm done by the 101 words of Porter and Jick will be reminiscent of past trials.

I'm betting on the Sunshine State.

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