

# OPIOID ADDICTION IS NOT A DRUG PROBLEM

By Kevin Friedman, MD, Medical Director, Halyard Health, Inc.

The opioid epidemic President Obama recently discussed is not a drug problem – it’s a healthcare problem. The best way to reduce heroin addiction and prescription drug abuse is by reforming the structural issues in our healthcare system that have created and fueled this national tragedy.

The Obama Administration’s initial memorandum<sup>1</sup> contained some sensible provisions, such as providing additional prescriber training for healthcare professionals and better access to medication-assisted treatment options for treating addicts. To make real headway, however, we need to stop the addiction cycle further upstream.

Unlike those who use methamphetamine or crack, most opioid addicts aren’t introduced to them through the black market. They are prescribed by their doctors as part of standard treatment protocols for treating postoperative and chronic pain – and far too often – healthcare providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for painkillers in 2012, enough for every American adult to have a bottle of pills.<sup>2</sup>

Opioids are most frequently used to treat post-operative acute pain, but they are also prescribed for minor ailments such as a toothache or a sprained ankle when a non-opioid treatment would do. This wouldn’t be a problem except for the fact that opioids are indeed addictive. Data from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, reveals that 1 in 4 patients prescribed opioid painkillers are at risk to progress to episodic or long-term prescription use.<sup>3</sup>

A sub-set of patients need opioids to manage pain associated with certain conditions, but the rampant

overuse of name-brand pills will go down in history as the most successful gateway to heroin use of all time, especially with young, student athletes exposed to opioids through sports-related injuries and surgeries. A University of Michigan researcher found that by the time high school athletes become seniors, approximately 11% will have used a narcotic pain reliever such as OxyContin or Vicodin—for nonmedical purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, many patients, especially young, student athletes and their parents, don’t fully understand the risks of taking painkillers, and even more aren’t aware that there are non-addictive alternatives. We’ve seen the power of patient education firsthand in changing the way we prevent and treat conditions from heart disease to breast cancer – and those efforts are sorely needed in this arena.

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One of the most promising prescriber practices that can have an impact on the prevention of opioid-abuse is employing multi-modal strategies to address pain. These strategies employ regional application of local

anesthetic agents paired with other non-opioid, non-addictive drugs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, acetaminophen, local anesthetics with regional blocks). Anesthesia and professional surgeon organizations recommend multi-modal management of pain, yet support of this well-documented opioid reduction strategy is not supported by legislation or reimbursement mandates.

The Obama Administration's focus on the opioid epidemic is a good first step to ending this crisis. To create substantial change, however, we'll need a united medical community, more informed patients, and better insurance reimbursement policies. These are tall orders, but they are not beyond our reach.

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1. The White House "FACT SHEET: Obama Administration Announces Public and Private Sector Efforts to Address Prescription Drug Abuse and Heroin Use." October 21, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/21/fact-sheet-obama-administration-announces-public-and-private-sector>
  2. CDC Vital Signs "Opioid painkiller prescribing." July 2014. <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/opioid-prescribing/>
  3. Mayo Clinic. "One in four people prescribed opioids progressed to longer-term prescriptions." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, July 1, 2015. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/07/150701115325.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/07/150701115325.htm)
  4. Sports Illustrated "How painkillers are turning young athletes into heroin addicts." June 18, 2015: page 2. <http://www.si.com/more-sports/2015/06/18/special-report-painkillers-young-athletes-heroin-addicts?page=2&devicetype=default>

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