

# Special Committee 2

## Question of Regulating the Opioid Epidemic



<b>Forum:</b>	SPC 2
<b>Issue:</b>	Tackling the Opioid Crisis
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<b>Position:</b>	President Chair

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## Introduction

The opioid crisis is one of the most pressing yet silent issues in the modern world. Over 115 people die daily in the United States of America as a result of overdosing on opioids such as prescription painkillers, heroin, or fentanyl (NIH, 2018). This crisis impacts everything from public health as well as social and economic welfare through addiction, debt, and in states and countries which are affected by opioids, it caused more deaths in 2015 than the AIDS crisis at its peak, accounting for 52,400 deaths in the USA (Dowell, 2017). The modern epidemic is largely accepted to have begun spreading in the 1990s in North America and has grown greatly since then, expanding beyond the borders of its countries of origin.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Opioid

A powerful class of drugs usually prescribed to treat pain. Once referred to substances derived from opium (FDA, 2018). There are four generally accepted categories of opioids : natural opioid analgesics, which include morphine and codeine; methadone, which is a synthetic opioid; synthetic opioid analgesics other than methadone, which includes drugs such as tramadol and fentanyl; and heroin, which is an illegal opioid synthesized from morphine.

## Heroin

An opioid drug made from morphine. The chemical rapidly binds to receptors in areas across the brain, producing a rush of euphoria (CDC, 2017). Heroin is one of the most addictive, dangerous drugs.

## Addiction

A drug addiction is a chronic disease characterized by compulsively seeking and using drugs, despite negative effects. Because drugs change the brain's structure and thought processes, a drug addiction is classified as a disease.

## Fentanyl

This is a highly potent, highly addictive opioid narcotic which is used to treat severe chronic pain, being up to 100x more potent than morphine (NIDA, 2018). This substance's danger rises even further when considering that it can unknowingly be mixed with heroin as their appearance is identical, making a "typical" dose of heroin deadly due to the potency of fentanyl. Additionally, the fentanyl which is sold and used on the street is less pure than the pharmaceutical version, thus leading to more unpredictable effects on the body (ProjectKnow).

## Naloxone

This is a drug which is used to reverse the effects of narcotic drugs used during surgeries or to treat pain in other situations, particularly overdoses.

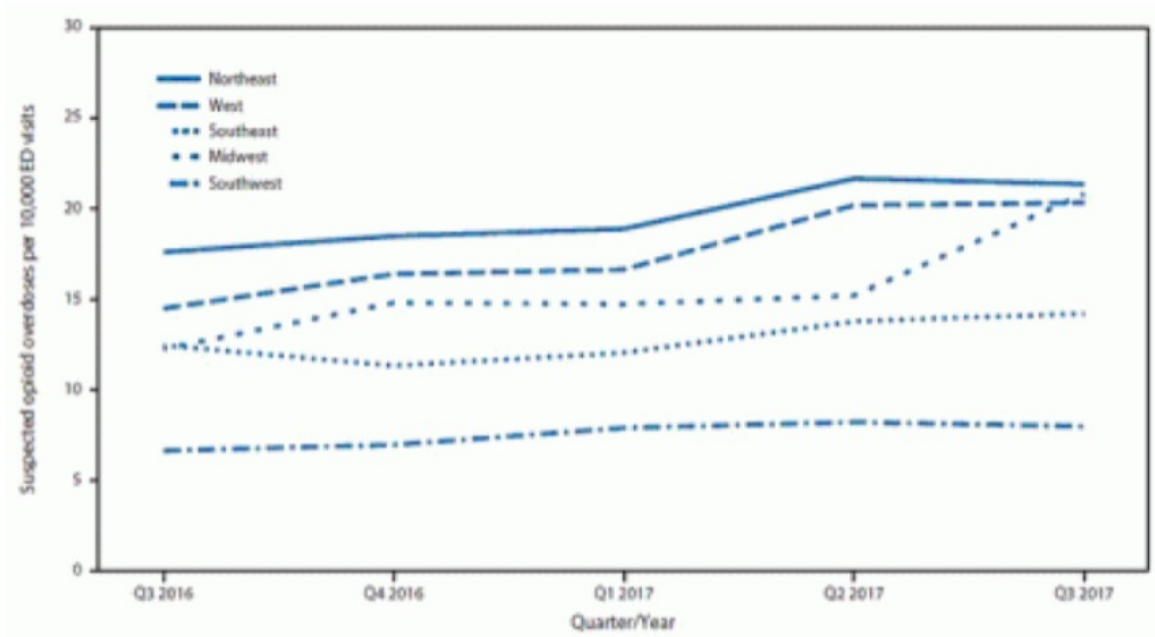
## General Overview

Opioid medications bind to the area of the brain that controls both pain and emotions, driving up levels of dopamine, which is the neurotransmitter responsible for the creation and maintenance of reward pathways (CNN, 2018). As the brain becomes used to these feelings of euphoria, it begins to take more and more of the drugs to generate the same effect and levels of pain relief and well-being, which leads to dependence upon these drugs and later, addiction. Those who are dependent or addicted typically experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop using the drugs, which often works as an incentive against stopping due to these negative symptoms of stopping. It is imperative to note that these drugs are illegal to use, sell, and possess without a prescription.

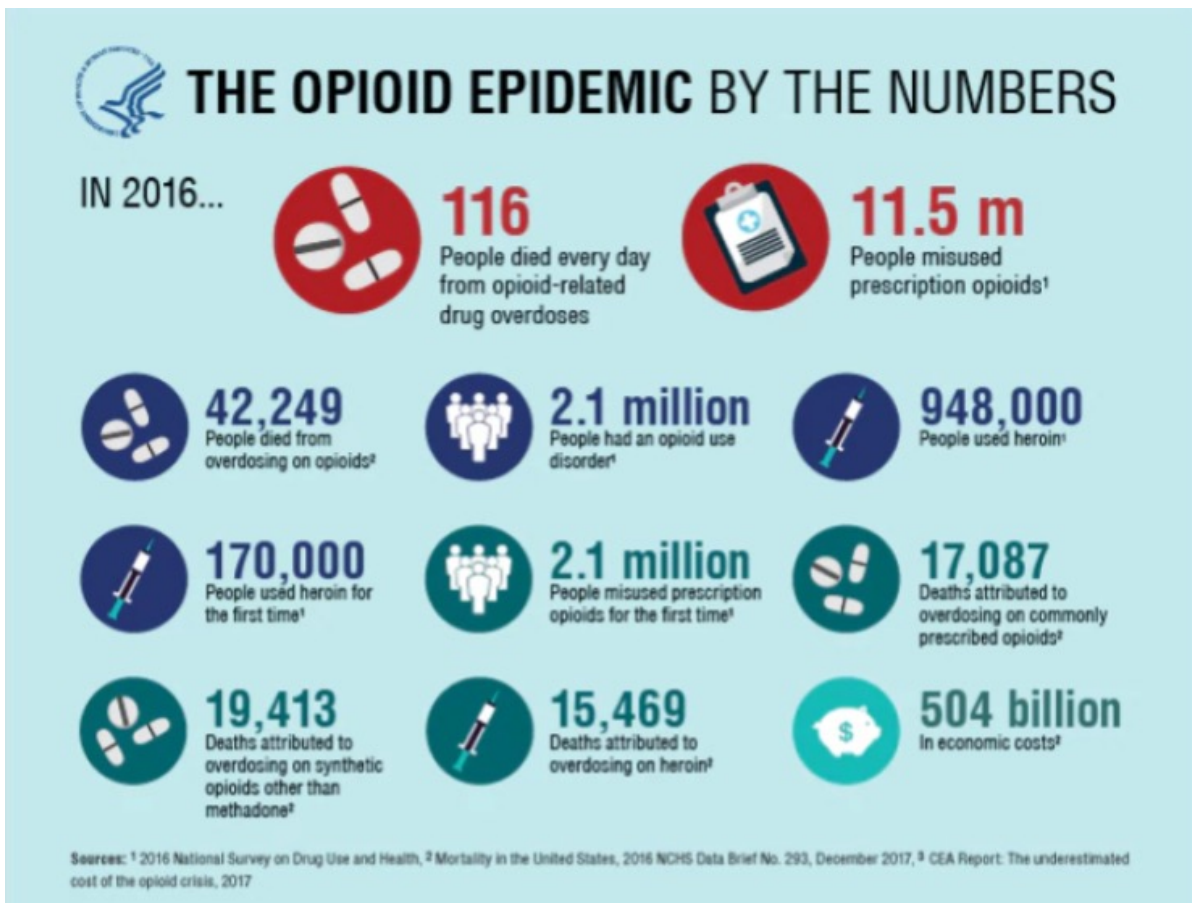
Perhaps the most well-known example of the lack of regulation and problem with widespread opioid use is the Opium Wars, fought mainly by China and Britain, with France taking Britain's side in the second war, in the mid to late 1800s. Arising from China's attempts to suppress the opium trade, originating from foreign traders (primarily British) who had been illegally exporting opium mainly from India into China. This resulted in widespread addiction, causing serious economic and social disruption (Britannica).

The opioid crisis is incredibly widespread, with an incredibly high number of countries impacted by it in one way or another. The impacts within individual countries are nearly as widespread as the number of countries affected, impacting everything from as small scale as individual lives changed and lost to as large a scale as an economic crisis for the government.

It's estimated that 21-29% of patients who have been prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them, with 8-12% of them developing an opioid use disorder, and a further 4-6% of those who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin use. Conversely, around 80% of those who use heroin first misused prescription opioids, further confirming the link between the two (NIDA, 2018). The use of opioids has been steadily rising, as can be seen below in Figure 1 (CDC, 2017).



The USA is a key example of the reach that the opioid epidemic has within a country, illustrated in Figure 2.



The number of overdose deaths related to heroin increased 533% between 2002 and 2016, from an estimated 2,089 to 13,219 (CNN, 2017). Though they represent only 5% of the world population, Americans use over 80% of the world's supply of opioid medications (The Guardian, 2018).

In recent years, there has been an increase in controversy in regards to how the opioid epidemic is seen as and is being treated in the media and politics. While addiction is indeed classified as a diagnosable illness, it is often seen and represented as being a moral or character failure rather than an issue which requires medical assistance and treatment. The stigma which is attached to drug use, particularly in America, often leads to the silencing of victims of the crisis and an unwillingness to come forward when someone who's suffering needs help in fear of judgement (Lopez, 2017). This attitude is certainly not exclusive to the USA, as similar outlooks in regards to the crisis as a whole and those suffering has been observed elsewhere in the world, such as within the UK and Canada.

## Major Parties Involved

### The United States of America (USA)

More than 2 million Americans have become dependent on or have abused prescription pain pills or street drugs such as heroin (CNN, 2017). The USA is one of the countries most impacted by the opioid crisis, often at the forefront of discussions about this issue. The USA is where the issue largely stems from, and is recognised to be the country with the most victims of the opioid crisis.

Many different programmes have been implemented in the USA in order to help resolve this problem, while many difficulties have been encountered along the way. One such example is that of the somewhat controversial needle exchange programme which was operated in Lawrence County, Indiana, and was then ended in October. A needle exchange

programme is such that allows addicts with access to sterile needles and other injecting equipment in the aim of health protection and less spread of bloodborne illnesses, which is a common occurrence due to the exchange of blood between people. Studies have shown that needle exchanges are effective in preventing the spread of HIV and hepatitis while not increasing overall drug usage (Lopez, 2017). This potentially life saving programme was shut down due to the County Commissioner saying he could not support it while being “true to my principles and my beliefs,” perfectly exemplifying the harmful attitude many officials in the USA hold towards this ever worsening crisis (NBC, 2017).

### **World Health Organisation (WHO)**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised opiates to be an incredibly pressing issue, stating that reports by the UNDCP have shown a global increase in the production, transportation, and consumption of opioids, heroin in particular. WHO further notes that this issue causes widespread problems ranging from social to economic, both on a personal and national scale. Additionally, they note that since heroin is often injected, use of unclean needles can add additional risks of HIV or hepatitis transmission and subsequent development of said diseases.

### **Centerstone Addiction Center**

This non-profit organization attempts to eradicate addictions across the US by providing variety of mental health and community services. When a patient with an addiction arrives, they initiate the withdrawal and help support them through their recovery (Centerstone, 2018).

## Afghanistan

Afghanistan produces an estimated 70-80% of the world's opium. Afghan opium production increased dramatically in 2016, partially due to the introduction of a new genetically modified poppy seed introduced by China. Since the country is so poor, opium provides a source of jobs as well as wealth.

## Australia

Tasmania, a state within Australia, also has a significant poppy farming industry, established in 1966.

## China

China has a long history with opioids, stemming from their involvement in the Opioid Wars with England. Despite the problem's historic roots in the country, China is working towards a solution. Beijing has recently taken steps to crack down on the production and export of drugs, and has placed fentanyl along with 22 related compounds on its list of controlled substances (Reuters, 2018). Though officials deny that a significant amount of fentanyl and other opiates originate in their country, they have been known in the past to cooperate with US efforts to control the flow of said substances into American soil (Garcia, 2018). Trump's recent tariffs against China are expected to have consequences in this area, as China could begin refusing to cooperate with the USA on controlling these synthetic opioids out of retaliation.

## United Kingdom

In recent years, the prescription of opioid drugs has been on the rise in England, with Tramadol being the most commonly prescribed version. This drug has been implicated in a rising number of deaths due to drug misuse; in Northern Ireland, the rate of death went up



from 9% - 40% in 2011, and the number of deaths in England nearly doubled from 2010 to 2014 (Boseley, 2018). While the opioid problem hasn't reached the same crisis level in the UK as it has in the USA, opioid problems aren't rare; it's estimated that more than 2 million working age people in England have taken prescription painkillers not prescribed for them in the year 2016-2017, and GPs in England prescribed 23.8 million opioid-based painkillers in 2017, which is equivalent to 2,700 prescriptions every hour, 10 million more prescriptions than in 2007 (BBC, 2018).

## Timeline of Key Events

<b>1839-42</b>	The first Opium War, fought between China and Britain.
<b>1856-60</b>	The second Opium War, fought between China against Britain and France.
<b>1898</b>	Heroin was first produced commercially by the Bayer Company.
<b>1914</b>	US Congress passes the Harrison Narcotics Act, which requires that doctors write prescriptions for narcotic drugs such as opioids (FDA, 2018).
<b>1924</b>	The Anti-Heroin Act bans the production and sale of heroin in the USA.



<b>1992</b>	112 million opioid prescriptions were dispensed by doctors in the USA.
<b>1996</b>	OxyContin went onto the market. This drug was marketed as a safer and less addictive pain pill than other opioids, which eventually they were brought to court over these false claims (CNN, 2016).
<b>2012</b>	The amount of opioid prescriptions in the USA reached its peak, at 282 million.
<b>2013</b>	The cost of medical care and substance abuse treatments for opioid addiction and overdose was an estimated \$78.5 billion in the USA (NCBI, 2013).
<b>2015</b>	More than 33,000 Americans died as a result of opioid overdoses, and an estimated 2 million people in the USA suffered from substance abuse disorders related to opioids (NIH, 2018).
<b>2016</b>	In the USA, there were more than 63,600 overdose deaths in the USA, including over 42,000 which involved an opioid, averaging out to 115 opioid deaths every day (CDC, 2017).

<p><b>2018</b></p>	<p>In February, a budget agreement signed by US President Trump authorised \$6 billion for opioid programmes, with \$3 billion allocated for each year of 2018 and 2019.</p> <p>In June, the White House announced a new multi-million dollar public awareness advertising campaign to combat opioid addiction.</p>
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## Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The HHS (US Department of Health and Human Services) has been focusing on working towards achieving five main priorities to alleviate this issue within America. These are as follow : improving access to treatment and recovery services, promoting use of overdose-reversing drugs, strengthening understanding of the epidemic through better public health surveillance, providing support for cutting-edge research on pain and addiction, and advancing better practices for pain management. Within this and operating as a component of HHS, the NIH (National Institutes of Health) has been working to solve the crisis through medical research, with a focus on things such as : safe, effective, non-addictive strategies to manage chronic pain; new, innovative medications and technologies to treat opioid use disorders; improved overdose prevention and reversal interventions to save lives and support recovery.

A case study which exemplifies potential measures which could be taken in order to combat the opioid crisis is that of the US state Ohio. In 2011, an Opiate Action Team was created to implement a multifaceted strategy, which 1. promoted the responsible use of opioids, 2. reduced the supply of opioids, and 3. supported overdose prevention and expanded access to naloxone. Since the development of this team, there were 8.1 million



fewer doses of opioids dispensed to Ohio patients in 2015, compared with the 782 million dispensed in 2011 (American Pharmacists Association, 2017).

## Possible Solutions

When attempting to resolve this pressing issue, it's imperative to consider topics such as the production and manufacturing of the pills, the trafficking of the pills, the selling of the drugs, and the treatment and rehabilitation of those who are addicted.

One proposed aspect of the search for solutions of this issue is to hold the companies in the prescription market legally accountable, both for actions they've done in the past as well as in precautions against future legal mishaps (Haffajee, 2017). The BBC outlined five potential ways to tackle the US drug epidemic which are applicable world wide, starting with stopping the over prescription of said opioids. A secondary measure is to provide increased access to treatment, since only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of those suffering from an opioid problem are treated for it. Another suggestion is to find ways to reduce the fatality of overdoses by stopping unnecessary deaths, primarily through the increased access to Naloxone. An increase in data collection and overall knowledge about this crisis has been said to be a potential solution as well, as the crisis initially emerged partially as a result of poor understanding of how to treat chronic pain. Finally, they suggest that opioid addiction should be treated the same as any other health issue, as opposed to the way it's often viewed as a nothing more than a moral failing and crime (BBC, 2017).

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