

ECOSOC – Economic and Social Council

Tackling the opioid epidemic



Forum	ECOSOC
Issue:	Tackling the opioid epidemic
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Introduction

The opioid epidemic has become one of the most important yet silent issues in the world of today. Every day, more than 130 people in the United States die after overdosing on opioids. The misuse of and addiction to opioids, including prescription pain relievers, heroin, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, is a serious national crisis that affects public health as well as social and economic welfare. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the total economic burden of prescription opioid misuse in the United States is \$78.5 billion a year, including the costs of healthcare, a decrease in productivity addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement. Therefore, it is important that we find solutions to this modern epidemic that causes more death than the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) crisis did at its peak.

Definition of Key Terms

Opioid

A strong drug used for pain relief, including anesthesia. However, they are also frequently used for their euphoric effects. There are four different genres 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.

Epidemic

An epidemic is a disease, product or issue that spreads quickly and affects many individuals at the same time.



Fentanyl

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid analgesic that is similar to morphine but is 50 to 100 times more potent. It is a schedule II prescription drug, and it is typically used to treat patients with severe pain or to manage pain after surgery. Synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, are now the most common drugs involved in drug overdose deaths in the United States. In 2017, 59.8 percent of opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl compared to 14.3 percent in 2010.

Morphine

Morphine is a strong painkiller. It's used to treat severe pain, for example after an operation or a serious injury, or pain from cancer or a heart attack. Morphine is available only on prescription. It comes as tablets, capsules, granules that you dissolve in water, a liquid to swallow, an injection. Morphine injections are usually only done in hospital.

Naloxone

Naloxone is a drug set to block and cure overdoses, but it is also used during surgeries to treat pain. Naloxone is useful both in acute opioid overdose and in reducing respiratory or mental depression due to opioids.

Overdose

An overdose is when you take an excessive amount of something, in this case drugs, that it becomes lethal or toxic for the human body.

General Overview

How the Opioid Epidemic started

There are many naturally occurring opioids that have been in use for centuries long before synthesization was possible. The following 6 opium alkaloids occur naturally: morphine, narcotine, codeine, thebaine, papaverine and narceine. These drugs, all derived from opium, were used both in medicine and illegal cartels way before the opium waves. It all started in the 1840s with the Opium Wars, the first one being between China and Britain, and the second one between China, France and Britain. These countries would strive to



become the biggest opium producers however this created conflict between the states. Until the 1990s Opium was not very used, it was not until then that the Opium Epidemic started with America being the greatest consumer with a consumption rate of 80% of the world's opium.

“First Wave”

The opioid epidemic began in the 1990s in the US when pharmaceutical corporations roundly assured the medical community of the safety of prescription Opioids as pain relievers. This period is described as the “first wave” of the Opioid epidemic. At the time, TV advertisements for medications increased to the point that patients could request prescriptions by name. Believing the threat of addiction to be low, doctors began prescribing painkillers in record numbers. By 2011, doctors were writing 238 million Opioid analgesic prescriptions annually.

“Second Wave”

The second wave of the opioid epidemic started in 2010 with a concurrent rise in Heroin deaths as prescription painkiller deaths continued to climb. That year in the US only, 16,651 people died from drug-induced overdose; heroin was involved in 3,036 deaths (The Opioid Epidemic, Rehab Spot, 2019). During this time, deaths from prescription Opioids overtook deaths from motor vehicle crashes, cocaine, and heroin combined. The rise in heroin use, as an injection drug, also led to a rise in the spread of infectious diseases like HIV and Hepatitis C.

“Third Wave”

The third wave of the opioid epidemic started only three years later with deaths involving highly potent synthetic opioids (like Fentanyl and Carfentanil). In 2016, nearly a third of all drug overdose deaths and half of all Opioid deaths involved a synthetic Opioid, up 100% from the previous year. What's worse, illegally manufactured derivatives synthetic Opioids are now often added to counterfeit pills (like Benzodiazepines) and other street drugs (Heroin, Cocaine, Marijuana) for added side effects and to increase addictiveness. This has also contributed to a rise in overdose deaths for those substances.



How do Opioids work?

Opioid medications bind to the area of the brain that controls both pain and emotions (the medial temporal lobe), driving up levels of dopamine, which is the neurotransmitter responsible for the creation and maintenance of reward pathways. 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. It is important to note that these drugs are illegal to use, sell, and possess without a prescription.

The future of the Opioid Epidemic

The number of overdose deaths related to heroin increased from around 2,089 to 13,219 between 2002 and 2016 in the US. As said before, even though Americans represent only 5% of the world population, they use over 80% of the world's supply of opioid medications. Recently, there has been an increase in controversy in regard to how the opioid epidemic is being treated in the media and politics. While addiction is classified as a diagnosable illness, it is often seen and represented as being a moral failure rather than an issue which requires medical assistance and treatment. This caused addicts to not seek medical help and instead, to keep this issue to themselves, this is frequently seen in the USA but is certainly not exclusive to the them, as similarities in regard to the crisis as a whole and those suffering has been observed elsewhere in the world. Therefore, it is necessary that we mobilize and find solutions to this pressing issue that kills so many citizens each year.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America

The opioid epidemic is a term that generally refers to the rapid increase in the use of opioid drugs, in the United States, beginning in the late 1990s. The increase in opioid overdose deaths has been dramatic, and opioids were responsible for 47,600 of the 70,200 drug overdose deaths overall in the US in 2017. Drug overdoses have become the leading cause of death of Americans under 50, with two-thirds of those deaths from Opioids. In



2016, the epidemic decreased overall life expectancy of Americans for the second consecutive year. Overall life expectancy fell from 78.7 to 78.6 years.

More than 2 million Americans have become dependent on or have abused prescription pain pills or street drugs such as heroin (CNN, 2017). Therefore, the US has put in place several centers to help the addicts combat their need of drugs. Those centers are called the CAC (Centerstone Addiction Centers), they consist of programs that help addicts with withdrawal.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan not being a wealthy country conducts most of its earnings through the making of opium drugs. Afghanistan produces an estimated 70-80% of the world's opium. Their opium production increased dramatically in 2016, partially due to the introduction of a new genetically modified poppy seed introduced by China.

China

China has for a long time been involved in the trafficking and making of opioids. Despite their Opioid Wars with England, the country is working towards the elimination of the production and exportation of drugs. Including, Fentanyl along with 22 related compounds on its list of controlled substances. Though the government deny that a big amount of Fentanyl and other opiates originate in their country, they have in the past been known to work with US efforts to control the importation of these substances into American soil. 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

Recently, 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; the number of deaths 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). (Stumpff, 2018)

Australia

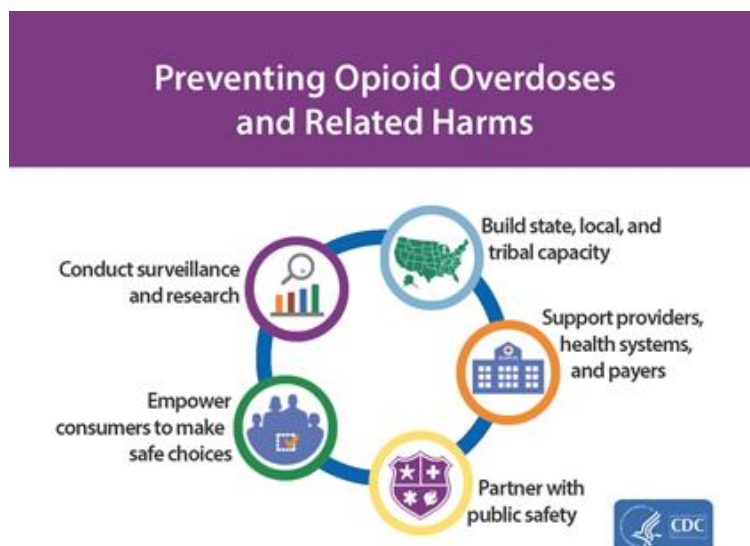
A state in Australia called Tasmania, has a poppy industry that produces a lot of opioid drugs, it was established in 1966.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) believes that the opioid epidemic is a seriously pressing problem, knowing that reports by the UNDCP have shown an increase in the production, exportation, and consumption of opioids. WHO notes that this issue causes widespread problems ranging from social to economic on national scale. Furthermore, they note that since heroin is often injected, use of unclean needles can add risks of HIV or hepatitis transmission and the development of certain diseases.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

CDC is an association built on centers all around the United States. It resembles the CAC (Centerstone Addiction Centers) on account of drug overdoses otherwise the organization focuses on disease control. The CDC prevents opioid overdoses and related harms in a special way that is presented below.



"Preventing Opioid Overdoses and Related Harms". CDC. 2018.



Timeline of Key Events

1839-42	First Opium War between China and Britain.
1856-60	Second Opium War between China against Britain and France.
1898	Heroin was produced for the first time commercially by the Bayer Company.
1914	US Congress passes the Harrison Narcotics Act, which requires that doctors write prescriptions for narcotic drugs, for example opioids.
1924	The Anti-Heroin Act bans the production and sale of heroin in the USA.
1992	112 million opioid prescriptions were given by doctors in the USA.
1996	OxyContin went onto the market. This drug was marketed as safer and less addictive than other opioids, eventually they were brought to court over these false claims (CNN, 2016).
2012	The amount of opioid prescriptions in the USA reached 282 million.
2013	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).
2015	33,000 Americans died as a result of opioid overdoses, and around 2 million people in the USA suffered from substance abuse disorders related to opioids (NIH, 2018).
2016	In the USA, there were more than 63,600 overdose deaths in the USA, including over 42,000 which involved an opioid, which was around 115 opioid deaths every day (CDC, 2017).
2018	In February, a budget agreement signed by US President Trump authorized \$6 billion for opioid programs, with \$3 billion allocated for each year of 2018 and 2019. In June, the White House announced a new multi-million-dollar public awareness advertising campaign to combat opioid addiction. (Stumpff, 2018)



2019 Nearly every US State sue Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, who is accused of being the “fuel” to the American opioid epidemic. (The Guardian, 2019)

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- “Enhancing and strengthening international and regional cooperation and domestic efforts to address the international threats posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids”, 12-16 March 2018 (E/CN.7/2018/L.6/Rev.1)
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5846593/>, AM J Public Health, February 2018.
- https://www.unodc.org/unodc/fr/commissions/CND/Resolutions_Decisions/Resolutions-Decisions_2010-2019.html UNODC, resolutions and decisions on drugs (including opioids), 2018-2019

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There haven't been any attempts to solve the issue except in the USA. The HHS (US Department of Health and Human Services) has been working towards the end of the epidemic with a 5-step plan. First of all they seek to improve access to treatment and recovery services, but also to promote the use of overdose-reversing drugs, to strengthen the understanding of the epidemic through better public health surveillance, to provide the support for cutting-edge research on pain and addiction, and advancing better practices for pain management. 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.

Possible Solutions

While trying to solve this issue it is important to think about where it all starts, so the manufacturing, the production and the selling of opioids. You have to keep in mind that if the access to the companies that produce such opioids was better, we would be able to have



more control over them. In 2017, BBC wrote an article with five steps on how to combat the opioid epidemic. First of all, stopping the over prescription of opioids. Another measure that could be taken would be to provide increased access to treatment, since only one quarter 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 and 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.

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Appendix or Appendices

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