



Origins of the Opioid Epidemic

Prescription drugs, including controlled substances, can be critical to patient care in certain situations; yet their misuse and abuse has created an opioid epidemic that is a serious and complex public health issue. Below is a compilation of commentary that represents the conclusions of a wide variety of subject matter experts, public officials and media commentary on how to understand, and thus help end, the opioid crisis.

Elisabeth Poorman

Primary Care Doctor in Everett, Massachusetts and a Clinical Instructor at Harvard Medical School

"I now know that everything that I was taught about opioids was wrong. . .The opioid epidemic has laid bare the flaws of American medicine." (*WBUR, June 15, 2018*)

The President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis

"The expectation of eliminating a patient's pain as an indication of successful treatment, and seeing pain as the fifth vital sign, which has been stated by some medical professionals as unique to the United States, was cited as a core cause of the culture of overprescribing in this country that led to the current health crisis." (*Final Report, November 1, 2017*)

The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board

"The opioid problem began in the 1990s, when prescriptions were filled too casually—for example, 30 days of opioids prescribed for a dental procedure that needed only three or four pills. Education for prescribers has improved in recent years but more is needed from within the profession."

(The Wall Street Journal, October 26, 2017)

Joshua Sharfstein

Vice Dean at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Former FDA Principal Deputy Commissioner

"There are some doctors who are clearly prescribing it wrong. . .And FDA did nothing to stop them."

(NBC News, August 3, 2018)



MEDIA

Sam Quinones

Journalist and Author of *"Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic"*

"[The crisis] is the first in modern America to be spread not by mafias, not by street dealers, but by doctors overprescribing pain pills convinced they were doing right by their patients." (*The Washington Examiner*, January 10, 2018)

Christopher Caldwell

Senior Editor at *The Weekly Standard*

"A whole generation of doctors was schooled in the new understanding of pain. Patients threatened malpractice suits against doctors who did not prescribe pain medications liberally, and gave them bad marks on the 'patient satisfaction' surveys that, in some insurance programs, determine doctor compensation." (*First Things*, April 2017)

Vox

"Should America legalize all drugs? This story should give supporters pause."

"...[T]he FDA, despite having the powers to do so, essentially took no action to regulate what was fairly clear misuse of one of the most potent opioids on the market." (*Vox* by German Lopez, August 6, 2018)

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Editorial Board

"Tens of thousands of lives might have been spared if the government had grasped the escalating threat of opioids more than a decade ago and mounted a muscular response." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 3, 2018)

The New York Times and ProPublica

"Amid Opioid Crisis, Insurers Restrict Pricey, Less Addictive Painkillers"

"[M]any insurers are limiting access to pain medications that carry a lower risk of addiction or dependence, even as they provide comparatively easy access to generic opioid medications." (*The New York Times and ProPublica* by Katie Thomas and Charles Ornstein, September 17, 2017)

NPR

"Should Hospitals Be Punished For Post-Surgical Patients' Opioid Addiction?"

"Hospitals that do not adequately address patients' pain may lose money for low patient satisfaction scores... physicians may still prescribe more, rather than fewer, opioids to avoid retribution from dissatisfied patients." (*NPR* by Martha Bebinger, November 26, 2017)

USA Today Editorial Board

"Physicians, many of them well-meaning, helped fuel the crisis by handing out opioids like candy. Now they can be of enormous help in bringing it under control by preventing the creation of new addicts." (*USA Today*, March 19, 2018)

The Opioid Epidemic by the Numbers

The history of the opioid misuse crisis dates back decades to changes in prescribing patterns around pain.



4.4 B

total prescriptions filled in 2015¹, equal to about **12 prescriptions per person** in the U.S.²



11%

of all prescriptions in 2015 were for **pain**, usually prescribed following surgery or injury, or for health conditions such as cancer.³



1 in 4

patients receiving long-term prescription opioid therapy in a primary care setting **struggle with opioid addiction**.⁴



PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTS

Michael Barnett and Anupam B. Jena

Assistant Professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health; Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School

"...[T]here is little doubt that many thousands of opioid users got their first introduction to an opioid from a physician who wanted to treat their pain."

(Los Angeles Times, February 27, 2017)

Anna Lembke

Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University Medical Center, and Program Director for the Stanford University Addiction Medicine Fellowship

"Basically, the epidemic began with doctors prescribing opioids more liberally for patients with pain..."

(Vox, March 2, 2017)

John Mafi

Assistant Professor of Medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles

"All reports are showing that opioid prescribing still occurs too frequently and (is) far higher than in the 1990s in the U.S....This is a cause for alarm and we need rapid and effective policy changes to decrease overprescribing and reduce opioid-related deaths."

(Reuters, August 1, 2018)

Andrew Kolodny

Co-Director of Opioid Policy Research Collaborative at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy

"I think this may be the best example in history of a regulatory agency failure leading to a public health catastrophe...[The FDA] could have changed the rules so that we wouldn't get a steady stream of new opioids hitting the market..." (NBC, January 23, 2018)



MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

Lori Tucker

Obstetrician-Gynecologist in West Virginia

"You can send as many pills in as you want, but if you don't have a prescription to take to the pharmacy from a physician, you're not going to get it filled. So where is the start of the problem? And it's a lot with my profession." (MSNBC Town Hall, March 13, 2017)

Michael Dacey

Executive Vice President and Chief Clinical Operations Officer at Riverside Health System in Virginia; Former President and Chief Operating Officer at Kent Hospital in Rhode Island

"The medical community was misled, but it shares responsibility for this deadly scourge."

(Fox News, April 10, 2017)

Atul Gawande

Surgeon, Brigham and Women's Hospital in Massachusetts, Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School

"We as a profession have caused an epidemic that is bigger than the HIV epidemic." (Vox by Sarah Kliff, September 8, 2017)

Barbara Bond

Emergency Physician in California

"...[C]ontributing and sustaining factor in the epidemic is the government's own role in including adequacy of pain control in the patient satisfaction survey administered by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services."

(The New York Times Letter to the Editor, April 28, 2018)

 From **180** to **640**

morphine milligram equivalents (MME), the amount of opioids prescribed per person tripled between 1999 and 2015.⁵

 **782 MME**

was the amount of opioids prescribed per capita in 2010, marking the peak of the opioid epidemic.⁶

[1] Source: IMS 2016 National Health Audit: <http://www.imshealth.com/en/about-us/news/ims-health-study-us-drug-spending-growth-reaches-8.5-percent-in-2015> [2] Source for U.S. population in 2015 is the US Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2014/cb14-tps90.html> [3] Source: IMS Health National Prescription Audit, 2016, data referenced from IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics Report: Medicines Use and Spending in the U.S.: A Review of 2015 and Outlook to 2020. April 2016. Page 40. Available online: <http://www.imshealth.com/en/thought-leadership/quintilesim-institute/reports/medicines-use-and-spending-in-the-us-a-review-of-2015-and-outlook-to-2020> [4] Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/prescribing/patients.html> [5] Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/opioids/infographic.html> [6] Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6626a4.htm>



GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Nora Volkow

Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse

"[W]e cannot continue the prescription practice of opioids the way we have been. We just can't." *(The New York Times, March 15, 2016)*

Vivek H. Murthy

Former U.S. Surgeon General

"Many of us were even taught – incorrectly – that opioids are not addictive when prescribed for legitimate pain." *(Letter from the Surgeon General, August 2016)*

Anne Schuchat

Principal Deputy Director of CDC

"The amount of opioids prescribed in the U.S. is still too high, with too many opioid prescriptions for too many days at too high a dosage." *(CDC Press Release, July 6, 2017)*

Kathleen Sebelius and Tommy Thompson

Former U.S. Secretaries of Health and Human Services

"Doctors, dentists, and other providers should take immediate steps to end overprescribing, while ensuring that patients who need drugs for acute pain relief maintain access to them." *(The Hill, July 12, 2017)*

Alex Azar

U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services

"We've got to rethink how we do pain management in this country." *(The Hugh Hewitt Show, March 19, 2018)*

Larry Cote

Partner at Quarles & Brady and Former Associate Chief Counsel for the DEA's Diversion and Regulatory Litigation Section

"In the 1970s, the DEA significantly reduced the amphetamine quota to successfully combat rising abuse of speed pills. In the 1980s, the methaqualone quota was reduced to combat the illicit use of quaaludes. It is perplexing why the DEA did not address the opioid epidemic in the same manner." *(The Washington Post Letter to the Editor, December 1, 2017)*

Tom Daschle and Bill Frist

Former U.S. Senate Majority Leaders

"As attitudes about treating pain began to shift, the demand for pain medication within the health care community dramatically increased... Well-meaning doctors, following the new standards but not aware of the long-term addictive effects of these drugs, prescribed opioid medications in greater doses and for longer periods in order to achieve best care for their patients, as they were trained to do." *(NBC's THINK, August 27, 2018)*

"We are resolved to be a constructive part of the effort to alleviate this complex national public health crisis. We are engaged and at the table. There is no single root cause of the crisis and addressing it requires that everyone work together."

– George S. Barrett, Executive Chairman, Cardinal Health



To learn more, visit cardinalhealth.com/OpioidActionProgram