

A Comprehensive and Compassionate Approach to Addressing the Opioid Crisis

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Introduction

There is a plethora of topics to choose from when looking at the vast array of public health crises in recent U.S. history. The opioid crisis may be one of the most devastating of them all. Its origin is rooted in the over-prescription of pain medications, that has now branched out into illegal drug use in the form of heroin and now synthetic drugs like fentanyl. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that opioid overdoses accounted for over 100,000 deaths in the United States in 2021, marking a 30% increase from the previous year (CDC, 2022). There's a lot to be said from these numbers about the mental health of our country. Unwrapping the details surrounding the opioid crisis reveals the sheer impact it has on our communities, how challenging it is to address, and why a collaborative effort from healthcare, law enforcement, and other communal resources are vital in moving the needle towards a healthier America.

Origins of the Opioid Epidemic

To gain a better understanding of how our country's opioid crisis came to be, look no further than the landscape of the pharmaceutical industry during the late 1990s. It's during this time that healthcare providers received false reassurance that opioids were completely safe and posed a minimal risk of addiction (CDC, 2021; NIDA, 2021). The overprescription of opioids soon came up on the radar of regulatory officials who subsequently placed restrictions surrounding the prescribing of these drugs. Once patients became addicted to drugs, that they were once able to get from their doctor, they needed a solution for their craving after they could no longer get them legally. This sparked the rise of illegal opiates like heroin and fentanyl, which people soon realized were cheaper and more potent (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021).

Epidemic Scale and Economic Consequences

As this problem progressed, it reached epidemic scale proportions, gaining a hold of nearly all demographics and age groups. In 2020, deaths derived from opioid overdoses accounted for nearly 75% of all drug-related fatalities in the United States (CDC, 2020). The tragedy caused by opioid-related deaths for so many families is already more than enough to cripple the wellness of our communities. To add insult to injury, the opioid crisis is responsible for costing more than \$1 trillion that is ripped away from healthcare as well as the criminal justice system, resulting in lost productivity and plenty of widespread frustration and burnout (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2020).

Long-Term Implications

Although we may feel the short-term impact of this issue already, what's even more concerning is the long-term implications of our nation's opioid crisis going unresolved. Families are torn apart by the misuse of these drugs, but what remains in the children of addicts is the tendency to misuse the same drugs in the future. The cycle of addiction can run for generations without interruption which is why it's so critical for not only drug users to seek recovery, but for their families to educate themselves on the fragility of their sobriety as well (Rural Health Information Hub, 2020). On a larger scale, opioid misuse exacerbates chronic health conditions, placing a greater strain on the healthcare system. As our population continues to grow, we can expect to exhaust more and more of our medical resources on conditions either primary or secondary to the misuse of opiates.

Vulnerable Populations

Opioid overdoses have become the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 45, surpassing even car accidents and gun violence (CDC, 2022). The use of illegal substances like

heroin largely increases one's chances of contracting diseases such as HIV or hepatitis C. Sadly, pregnant mothers aren't exempt from drug abuse and set their children back in life before they're even born by misusing narcotics, causing neonatal abstinence syndrome in newborns.

The pathophysiology of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) begins with exposure of the fetus to opioids or other addictive substances during pregnancy. These substances cross the placenta, entering the fetus's bloodstream and affecting its developing nervous system. The immediate effects of NAS can be seen through the infant's symptoms caused by withdrawal, such as tremors, poor feeding, irritability, along with a myriad of others. Research suggests that NAS may increase the likelihood of chronic health conditions, including respiratory and gastrointestinal problems, which could continue through childhood and beyond (NIDA, 2021).

Addressing the Crisis

In communities with scarce mental health services or medication assisted treatment programs, the opioid crisis is disproportionately more severe. The Rural Health Information Hub supports this claim iterating those residents in rural areas are more likely to abuse illicit substances like opioids and deal with much higher instances of overdose when compared to urban populations, largely due to the aforementioned lack of resources (2020). The need for specialized medical resources such as telehealth medicine or transportation to facilitate appointments in metropolitan areas is underlined by these findings.

Bridging the gap between patients struggling with substance abuse and healthcare providers requires a comprehensive approach incorporating factors such as law enforcement agencies or even counseling organizations. As I mentioned previously, medication assisted treatment or MAT, is used to monitor patients that are given controlled drugs that aid in the abstinence of potential street drug use. Providers that have earned a special certification can

prescribe medications such as methadone or suboxone in conjunction with counseling and behavioral therapy.

Literature published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration argues that MAT programs are highly effective in curbing the use of opioids and increasing the likelihood of positive recovery outcomes (2021). Law enforcement officials are now being trained to shift their focus from punitive measures to harm reduction in individuals abusing opioids. Some agencies have enacted policies that encourage low level offenders to be diverted to treatment centers rather than jail to solve the root cause of the problem (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2022).

Another catalyst in the fight against the opioid epidemic is public health initiatives. Just recently, the CDC updated its Clinical Practice guideline for the prescription of pain medication like opiates (2022). They emphasize the prioritization of initiating pain management with NSAID medications, starting patients on immediate release opiate medication, using the lowest effective dosage of opioids, and closely monitoring what benefits the patient is receiving from opioid therapy.

Surrounding opioid use disorder is a public stigma that exists throughout the communities of users and healthcare providers. This stigma elicits a multitude of negative preconceptions such as judgmental and reluctant attitudes associated with caring for these patients. There exists a deficit in the basis of knowledge about the treatment of opioid use disorder that could benefit from widespread education on encouraging the discussion around addiction as a long-term problem. Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse implies that reduction programs geared towards healthcare staff and the public can increase treatment-seeking behavior and more positive patient outcomes (2021).

Yet another barrier for medical providers exists for the ability to prescribe medication assisted treatment in the form of legal liability. They must endure further certification and training to be granted the ability to prescribe medications like buprenorphine. Greater incentivization for providers to complete these additional tasks can assist in bridging the gap between those struggling with addiction and life-saving treatment. Policies that would encourage MAT and the standard treatment for opioid use disordered patients would emphasize the need for more providers that are MAT certified.

There are programs in place that already provide support for communities lacking medical treatment such as harm-reduction centers and peer-support networks. Treating addiction comprehensively requires the utilization of behavioral therapy in combination with things like MAT. The CDC underlines that meeting individuals where they are in their recovery journey while promoting a judgement free and safe environment (2023).

Innovative Solutions

Addiction to opioids can damage an individual's ability to reapply themselves back into the workforce once they are on the path to recovery, making relapse a likely scenario. Mental health counseling and housing assistance programs make it possible for those in recovery to get their feet off the ground and back into society. For those still using, needle exchange programs have been established. To those who are unfamiliar with intravenous street drug use, this may seem counterintuitive and appear as though these programs are encouraging addiction by making it easier for users to obtain supplies.

The importance of needle exchange programs lies in the pathology of infectious diseases like blood borne pathogens (HIV), bacterial infections (Endocarditis), and more (CDC, 2023). These diseases can easily spread through the sharing of needles, placing a larger strain on

healthcare that would be tasked with the treatment of these patients, not to mention the morbidity and lifelong impact many of these can have on the patient. Education for the general population to better understand how our government is handling the situation would alleviate conflict on a political decision-making level.

Addressing the opioid crisis in a holistic manner requires policy reform targeted towards integrating behavioral health into primary care along with increasing funding for communal mental health programs. The use of telehealth in establishing MAT programs can reduce the geographical discrimination against patients with opioid use disorders in rural areas (American Society of Addiction Medicine [ASAM], 2020).

Although we've made significant strides towards solving the opioid crisis, there's still much progress to be made in access to treatment, and hesitancy from medical providers to prescribe MAT due to its requirement for careful monitoring and potential legal liability (Alzheimer's Association, 2021). As our country has limited the supply of prescription opiate medications, users have turned to illegal means to obtain them, creating yet another obstacle to overcome when addressing the situation comprehensively (USDA, 2021).

The Nursing Perspective

From a nursing perspective as well as encounters with the opioid epidemic before and during my time in healthcare, identifying solutions has always been a desire of mine. Our nation's top priority when addressing the opioid crisis should be increasing access to treatment, especially in rural areas. Technological advances have made it easier than ever before to coordinate care through means such as telehealth, which not only increases accessibility, but treatment affordability as well (ASAM, 2020).

I've also hinted at a greater need for education that reduces the stigma surrounding opioid addiction and seeking treatment. There is a need to normalize patients seeking treatment for their addictions, which would empower more to ask for help (CDC, 2020). Funding towards the education of medical providers about MAT and other forms of behavioral therapy can increase their knowledge about addiction and the variety of options as their disposal when it comes to caring for patients (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021).

Conclusion

Addiction is an evil, viscous cycle that has taken away countless loved ones from their families. The opioid epidemic in the United States is at the forefront of just how crippling it can be. I'd like to close on a quote from Robert F Kennedy's speech at the University of Cape Town in 1966. "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope..." (Kennedy, 1966). Although his speech predated the opioid epidemic by nearly three decades, these words can be a spark of hope for everyone involved in combatting the opioid crisis today.

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