

Addressing Ethical Controversy

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The Opioid Epidemic

Methods of treating pain have been constantly evolving since the earliest written records. Opioids are substances that are prescribed by doctors to be used primarily for pain relief. The main concern regarding opioids is the side effect of addiction. Opioids are very addictive when misused which can result in serious consequences. From 1999-2018, almost 450,000 people died from an overdose, including both illicit and prescription forms. This is a very serious epidemic, but one that is not talked about enough because of the dark statistics and ethical issues including addiction, the availability of prescribing these drugs, and the consequences of using opioids illegally.

One of Joe Bidens ideas while running in the 2020 election was to end all incarceration for drug use alone and instead divert individuals to drug courts and treatment. Currently, someone can face years in prison for illegal drug possession. This brings up a very important issue because if someone is addicted to opioids, the issue is now mixed between legal and medical. Addiction is a biopsychosocial disorder, not a choice. When someone consumes the chemicals found in drugs, the nerve communication system is altered. Some drugs, such as cocaine or methamphetamine, cause cells to release too much dopamine. This is one of the factors that produces the pleasure effect. The communications between the reward circuit cells

are reprogrammed now to release dopamine when the drugs are ingested. This makes the brain think that you need those drugs to feel that pleasure. The science proves that even though taking those first couple of drugs is your own choice, addiction is a physiological process. While it is true that they will be forced to sober up in jail, the withdrawal side effects can be unbearable. So, the question arises, is it ethical to send someone to jail for something that is a disease, not a choice? A lot of factors could come into play, which makes this a complicated topic. Did the addiction start after a medical professional prescribed them these opioids? Or did the addiction start through illegal means, like purchasing opioids that are not prescribed to you. There can also be a genetic predisposition to substance abuse, so can we actually put people in jail because of their genes? Do these questions even matter because is it ethical to not provide proper treatment for someone with a disease, but instead punish them for it? By putting someone with an addiction problem in jail, it is just a temporary solution to the problem. As soon as they get out of jail their mind is going to go straight back to drugs. On average, 95% of incarcerated addicts will return to substance abuse after they are released from jail. About 65% of prison inmates meet the criteria for addiction, yet only 11% are receiving any form of treatment while in jail. This is why therapy and actual medical attention is necessary for people who suffer from addiction. Addiction is not a disease where you can just heal from it over time. You have to learn how to live without drugs and learn how to control your mind and body. While these people are in jail, their families are paying the price as well. Kids are ending up in the foster care system and having to provide for themselves. This creates an unstable home environment and now those kids are more likely to make the same mistakes because of their negative role models. While there does need to be more effort into stopping this issue at the

route of the cause, which would be decreasing the amount of opioids prescribed or making sure a deeper screening of the patient is provided before prescribing, treatment for addiction to opioids is becoming more advanced by the day. Another issue deals with racial biases amplifying negative consequences for substance abuse. Studies have shown that drug arrest are more likely to lead to treatment in white people and to an arrest in black people. This could also lead to the fact that there isn't an age requirement to be prescribed opioids. Teenagers that get their wisdom teeth out are often prescribed opioids regardless of the fact that they are still developing. This could be the first experience with opioids and lead to a life of drug abuse. There are multiple medications now that have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that can effectively treat opioid use disorder. It might seem weird to treat a drug issue with other drugs but because of the chemical imbalance in your brain, this is a very effective form of treatment. Methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone are three of the most common medications. These medications are recommended to be tried while in a treatment center and can be monitored. Buprenorphine is the only medication that is approved by the FDA to be given to adolescents 16 and older. If medications to treat opioid addiction have an age restriction, why don't opioids? There are some obvious alternatives to using opioids for pain management, like Tylenol, aspirin, ibuprofen, and there are other methods such as acupuncture, cold and heat, massages, or physical therapy. Each patient has a different situation and different needs to be met so it is important that you and your doctor discuss all of the options. In July 2019, a new house bill went into effect that requires a healthcare practitioner to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using non-opioid alternatives with patients before providing anesthesia or prescribing, ordering, dispensing, or administering an

opioid. If someone is addicted to opioids, it is going to be very difficult for them to turn them down. It is important that the healthcare worker can read body language and try to differentiate what is taking place. Questions about family drug abuse history, their current pain level, if they've ever taken an opioid before, and others should be asked and used to evaluate if the patient qualifies to be prescribed.

Part of being a responsible adult is being able to make decisions and be responsible regarding your health. It is not necessarily the drugs or the doctor's fault if you choose to misuse the medication. There are warning labels about addiction and it is the year 2020, so most people know and understand the concern for addiction when taking these opioids. This is where it gets shady regarding the punishment of jail time for possessing illegal opioids. Everyone knows that if you do something illegal, you will and should be punished for it. If you know you have a family background of addiction or know you aren't responsible enough to properly use opioids, it is your own responsibility to use a different pain treating method. The medical professionals are not forcing you to take opioids. In the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies reassured the community that opioids were, in fact, not addictive and that there should be no concern regarding using opioids as pain management methods. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services officially declared a public health emergency for the opioid epidemic. That was three years ago. New data also shows that more people who started off addicted to opioids are overdosing on cheaper drugs such as heroin. Addiction does not only affect yourself. The opioid crisis has shown an increase in babies being born dependent on opioids because of their mother's addiction while they were pregnant. An increase in the

spread of infectious diseases like HIV and hepatitis C are also increased because of the opioid crisis.

Last year, President Trump created a budget for 74 million dollars in investments to increase availability for overdose reversing drugs. Naloxone, or Narcan is a medication that is designed to quickly reverse an overdose on opioids. The medication binds to opioid receptors and can reverse and block the effects. It can restore normal respiration to a person whose breathing has stopped or slowed down because of their overdose. The patient would still need to go to an emergency room to be evaluated, but this is a quick, lifesaving drug that needs to be more available in places with a high opioid overdose rate. The CDC (centers for disease control and prevention) is responsible for identifying areas of outbreaks, collecting data, and responding to the communities that are affected. The center for disease control and prevention is making efforts to include better tracking of both nonfatal and fatal overdoses, improving communication to care for people and their families that are struggling with addiction and struggling with the risk of overdose, improving the prescription process for these opioids, and implementing other public health care activities. By working together with the community, preventing opioid overdoses and misuse can make a difference.

The opioid epidemic is slowly becoming more manageable, with the help of spreading awareness and knowing the facts. It is never too late to help someone with an addiction and through the proper steps, anyone can overcome this. There are many ethical questions regarding the use of opioids, but hopefully soon we can make a change in the ways we punish criminals with addictions.

Works Cited.

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