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Opioid Epidemic in Illinois

Pain is an unavoidable part of life. While everyone experiences pain, the way we choose to treat our ailments differs from person to person, coast to coast, and even continent to continent. There are many ways to alleviate discomfort. Some of these methods include pain management and therapy, but the most commonly used approach is medications. Copious amounts of people who undergo surgeries or suffer from chronic pain rely on opioid pain killers to temporarily reduce the irritation caused by their illness(es). Even though extreme pain killing drugs such as oxycodone, fentanyl, and methadone can be found effective, they are also highly addictive. In fact, according to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, nearly two million Americans had become addicted to prescription pain relievers in 2015 alone (Opioid Addiction). However, this problem is not to be blamed on those prescribed the medications, but the pharmaceutical companies and doctors that pressure their clients into addictive prescription medication rather than other suitable methods. In order to see a significant reduction in opioid addiction and deaths, the amount of opioid based prescription painkillers must be reduced by having law makers hold major pharmaceutical companies and poor doctors accountable for pressuring and overprescribing their patients.

In recent years, Illinois has seen a major increase in opioid related overdoses. An official document released by the Illinois Department of Human Services reads that the state has one of

the highest opioid overdose related deaths when compared to others (3). Beyond that, out of all the states drug-related overdoses in 2016, over eighty percent were opioid related fatalities (3). While these statistics are shocking and frightening, the state is working to try and combat this epidemic. Illinois implemented multiple different measures such as: making Naloxone (overdose reversal medication) more accessible, increasing education and awareness about drug overdoses, and attempting to increase funding for Medicaid so addicts can seek help more affordably (16). Despite the state acting in some respects, they failed to majorly pursue opioid prescribing guidelines. Dennis Thompson, writer for CBS News, claims, “More than 1 in 3 Americans Prescribed Opioids in 2015.” Even though Thompson wrote his article about nationwide statistics and, not statewide, the fact that highly addictive opioids are being over prescribed to the population is self-evident. With more people being prescribed, the chances for addiction and death only continue to climb. To see a large drop in opioid related drug overdose, the state of Illinois should take more action towards prescribing guidelines in highly addictive substances.

One efficient way to combat the opioid crisis in Illinois is by having government officials hold the CEO’s of pharmaceutical companies accountable for pressuring doctors to prescribe these addictive medications to their patients. It has been recorded that executives from big pharmaceutical companies have been pressuring physicians to prescribe more opioids. Recently, a CEO of a drug company, Insys Therapeutics, was arrested for allegedly bribing doctors to prescribe more opioids to patients. A Newsweek article written by Melina Delkic says, “Kapoor and other company executives were allegedly part of a conspiracy to bribe practitioners in several states to get them to prescribe the fentanyl-based Subsys nasal spray.” Unfortunately, this seems to be a common trend among CEO’s of pharmaceutical companies, and even doctors. Shockingly, a study published by the American Public Health Association revealed that one in

every twelve physicians received a payment for any prescription involving an opioid, the 29-month study confirmed (Hadland). These documents show that big pharmaceutical companies are more concerned about profit over ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their patients. If Illinois government banded together to crack down on the fraud involved in the local pharmacy industry, it is possible this could greatly reduce the amount of opioid dependency and overdoses. If the state was successful in exposing even one faulty pharmaceutical company that is native to the state, this could bring opioid abuse and statistics down more, even if it is by even the slightest percent.

If Illinois lawmakers reduced the quantity of opioid painkillers given to a patient in a single prescription, this would then help lower the number of people who become dependent on these addictive substances. It is interesting when you look at the people they market their medications to. Many doctors often try to prescribe opioids to patients who typically do not need to be medicated by the highly addictive painkillers. This is noted in a CBS News article that says, “Many people receive opioids they don't need and pass them on to relatives who aren't getting the treatment they need for chronic pain, the researchers noted” (Thompson 1). Due to patients getting overmedicated by their doctors, family members then hand down their excess prescription to those who appear to be in pain, thus easily leading to substance abuse if the medications fall into the wrong hands. Interestingly enough, the CBS News article also mentions, “Of those who misused prescription opioids, more than 50 percent got the medications as hand-downs from family or friends” (Thompson 1). This only further validates that doctors often overprescribe their patients, leading to the leftover pills to be consumed by those who are not supposed to be ingesting them. If a typical thirty day supply of OxyContin was given to a patient after a surgery, lawmakers can demand the number of pills be reduced to fifteen. Additionally, if

the patient was still experiencing pain, they could return to their physician to get a refill of their prescription. This would help greatly reduce the chances of addiction and excess medication lingering around everyday households.

If Illinois lawmakers come together to hold large pharmaceutical companies and faulty doctors accountable for pressuring and overprescribing patient's addictive opioid medications, the state would see a major decline in drug abuse and opioid overdose rates. This has proven to be effective in states like Ohio. Governor John Kasich began cracking down on prescription opioid abuse by refining prescription guidelines. Since then he has reported a forty-two million decrease in opioid doses from 2012 to 2014 (1). Additionally, he also reported, "The number of individuals 'doctor shopping' for controlled medications decreased from more than 3,100 in 2009 to approximately 960 in 2014" (1). If those in government positions in Illinois were as concerned about their citizens like those in Ohio, it is possible we could have seen a decrease in deaths years ago. However, it's never too late to be hopeful that lawmakers will see that these strategies have helped other fellow states during their opioid epidemics. It is also fair to mention that many believe the opioid epidemic is not to be blamed on Big Pharma. Those who believe pharmaceutical companies and doctors have done little to no wrong often mention that no one forces anyone to take prescription opioid pain relievers. While this is true, no one walks out of doctor's office not taking a medical professional's advice, similar to how no one asks to become addicted to opioids. Among the many solutions to solving the opioid epidemic sweeping Illinois, it is evident that forcing major pharmaceutical companies and unfit medical professionals to become accountable for their part in the epidemic is necessary for installing better guidelines for prescribing such addictive medications.

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