Addiction: The Injury to Addiction Pipeline

Backstory:

John is a factory worker in Northwest Indiana and his job is to attach doors to the newly manufactured cars and SUVs. One unfortunate day, a car was not aligned properly and fell off the assembly line pinning John between a post. This caused him to fracture his arm, ankle, and dislocate his other shoulder.

John was otherwise okay after surgeries and was in good spirits through treatments and physical therapy. He was prescribed some medications which did away with most, if not, all of the excruciating pain.

Months went by and John is making a steady recovery. He is complaining less and less about pain to the doctors, PTs can see almost pre-accident range of motion, and his primary physician began to wane him off of the medication. What was a month’s supply of 2 twice a day became one before bed for 14 day intervals.

John began to develop a tolerance and need for the painkillers so he began to double up on his doses, complaining about new pains, and ultimately buying pills on the street.

Weeks go by, and John’s supervisors begin to inquire about his return and recovery as the 6 month time is approaching. John is unable to be reached, his wife hasn’t heard from him in days, and the family is beginning to get worried. His car is found abandoned in a McDonald’s parking lot with all of his belongings as well as needles.

It was later learned that John suffered a minor overdose and checked himself out of the hospital 2 days later due to there being sufficient evidence supporting that this overdose was not intentional.
How the Crisis Came to Be and Who is Responsible:

As we hear in this personal story shared, we can sympathize with John as well as the many other people suffering from addiction which were caused through similar means. Every year we hear about how the opiate crisis is “spiraling out of control” and at “record levels”. In those grim descriptions, we lose the origins of the individual men, women, and families affected by the crisis and the origins of the problems. Drugs and opioids that are rife for abuse can be readily found legitimately through prescriptions as well as excess, unwanted, or unnecessary prescriptions that make their way onto the streets.

Overdose deaths are the 8th leading cause of death in the United States behind some major causes such as COVID, cancer, heart disease, and accidental/unforseen deaths. When using CDC data, “unintentional injuries”, which account for overdoses as well, are far and away the leading cause of death for every age group between 15 and 44.

These include vicodin, oxycodone, oxycontin, morphine, etc, which are generally safe when and if prescribed and used as directed by a physician for a specific time, dosage, and purpose.

However, the aggressive marketing tactics done by Purdue Pharma misled the general public to the dangerous and addictive properties of their drug.

Government inaction and the same aggressive marketing tactics were aimed towards politicians in the form of lobbying. Pharmaceutical lobbying since 1998 has averaged to over $4.8 Billion or an average of $233 million per year. This money is used to fund the support of representatives, senators, and regulators in order to draft favorable policies regarding restrictions and pricing.

The current state of the opioid crisis is a multi-layered failure in society to address the many problems in the health system due to lack of available or inadequate resources, corporate greed, and lawmaker inaction.

How Can We Fix This? Can We Fix This?:

Figure 1. National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths* Number Among All Ages, by Gender, 1999-2020

![Graph showing the number of national drug-involved overdose deaths by gender from 1999 to 2020.]
As we see the dispensing rates for these opioids has dropped after 2012, the ripple effects of a misled public to the likelihood of addiction began to take shape even as drug producers rolled back dispensing. Since then, the annual rate has fallen steadily to 142 million in 2020. However, the rate of people dying to overdose since that time has more than doubled, according to the NIH.

With prescribers and the public being more aware of the acute risk of addiction, on even small doses, over short periods of time, it became tough to increase or even renew a prescription. This forced many people to turn to illicit means to satisfy their addiction. Prolonged action has already led to more than 840,000 otherwise preventable deaths and caused all sorts of problems for millions of others. These include long unemployment, homelessness, family problems, increased risk of incarceration, and more.

According to the professor of public health leadership and member of the Stanford-Lancet Commission Howard Koh, illustrates some things that give him “hope” in the fight against the crisis. For one, he says that the change in language from “abuse” to “use disorder” to shift the rhetoric that it is a “medical and health issue and not a moral failing”. He also asserts that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires private insurers to cover substance use disorders and Medicaid to be expanded in wake of the increase in demand for treatments. There is shown to be a decrease in deaths and increase in treatments administered, according to Koh, in states that have adopted these.

As we have seen the dangers of a profit driven society and the long term effects it can have on us, we have a few options to roll back the damage. Regulators can be more thorough and restrictive on what drugs can be approved for public use. Lawmakers can enact policy that sets a standard for all drugs for specific purposes going forward. Lawmakers must also forego their own interests and limit campaign contributions and donations. These contributions suggest a clear quid pro quo that is not in the interest of the general public these lawmakers were elected to serve.

In the future, we can see a waning opioid crisis and a general public able to trust that what they are told and given is exactly that. This can only be done if society has a complete overhaul from government, to the healthcare industry, to the sentiment around those that we may know (with how rampant this crisis has been) that have unfortunately fallen through the cracks.