

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“OxyContin Use is Totally Out of Control”

According to the American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians, Americans consume 80% of the world's pain pills. The powerful pain killer, OxyContin, was introduced in 1996 and was the focus of a Canadian documentary, "OxyContin: Time Bomb," which chronicles how Purdue Pharma plowed its way into the marketplace, preying on vulnerable pain sufferers, addicts and the physicians trying to help them. It tells the story of how OxyContin became the most widely prescribed, abused, and profitable narcotic in history. Since then, Canada has had the second-highest number of prescription opioid painkiller addictions and the world's second-highest death rate from overdoses. Tragically, in America, narcotic overdose deaths now surpass deaths from murders and fatal car accidents. Now, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the narcotic painkiller OxyContin for pediatric use, saying it is safe for children as young as 11 who are experiencing chronic pain that cannot be treated successfully with other medications. OxyContin is an extended-release version of oxycodone. Rates of opioid addiction are on the rise, especially in young people. According to the National Institutes of Health, approximately 2.1 million Americans are struggling with an addiction to prescription painkillers. Abusing this class of drugs is often a precursor to heroin addiction. Some experts argue that specialists are too quick to prescribe these drugs to kids. Nearly 1 in 6 children who see a specialist for migraines are prescribed opioid medications as a first-line therapy, even though use of the drug can cause the condition to become more chronic and treatment-resistant and may increase the risk for drug addiction. Purdue, OxyContin's manufacturer, addressed potential abuse in 2010, when the company released a re-formation of the drug that is tamper-resistant and difficult to crush or dissolve. Purdue Pharma tried to convince physicians that OxyContin was the new "miracle pill" and in 2007, Purdue pled guilty to deceptive marketing and was fined \$600 million. However, in 2013, the FDA allowed the release of a new version of the drug. OxyContin has proved to be a gateway drug to heroin and leads millions down the tragic path of heroin addiction, methadone dependence, overdose and death.

In the America that I love, actions like this by Big Pharma and the FDA are exactly why we do not trust them. The only way to get off OxyContin is hospitalization and conversion to other opioids. Exposing our children to dangerous and addictive drugs could be considered as representing the "crime of the century." We appear to over prescribe pain medications and then blame the addicted. We have got to stop the drug supply and the "drug pushing," and aggressive marketing of drug companies, most of which is all in the name of "profit."

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

rhowesmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org

