Opioid Epidemic

February 15th, 2020

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**Introduction**

Opioids are synthetic drugs derived from opium. The most abundant natural opioids obtained from opium is morphine. When opium was first discovered, the it was used as a pain reliever during surgeries, acute injuries, and really any condition that demanded relief from pain (Addiction center, 2018). With the advancement in medical research, some ways have been implemented to regulate the strength of morphine in pain reduction, depending on the condition for which pain is to be managed. The unregulated use of opioids may lead to serious adversities, often referred to as epidemics. The opioid epidemic, refers to the adverse effects and even deaths resulting from opioids ranging from prescriptions, illicit use, and drug overdose. Currently, opioids are one of the leading causes of unexpected deaths in the United States. In this regard, this paper focuses on the spread, development, and effects of the epidemic.

**Development of the Opioid Epidemic**

The origin of the opioid epidemic in the United States traces back to the ending of the 1990s. American pharmaceutical firms failed to inform medical practitioners about the long term effects from using opioid-based pain relievers. As a result, doctors began to prescribe the drugs without any restrictions or hesitation. (NIH, 2019). Opioid users often consumed opioid derived drugs in excess. Typically, a patient becomes dependent on the opioid pain relievers from continually taking these for pain management. Once any type of pain starts to present itself in the patient, the patient is conditioned to relieve the pain with their prescribed opioid. The addiction began in smaller percentages, mostly among people who had been prescribed to take it as a pain reliever. However, the drug turned out to be a significant challenge within the United States health sector.

**Effects of opioid addictions**

Opioid addiction is spreading swiftly, and as a result, addicts have developed an opioid overdose triad that presents as decreased level of consciousness, pinpoint pupils, and respiratory depression (WHO, 2018). Countless Americans have developed addictions in the course of misusing opioids, particularly those that are prescribed narcotics to relieve pain. The trend has drastically affected the country making the government declare opioid addictions as a national crisis. In 2014, approximately 27 million Americans were identified to be using illicit drugs, opioids being one of them (NIDA, 2016 – 2020). In 2017, more than 47,000 citizens of the United States lost their lives due to opioid overdose, including prescription opioids, heroin, and fentanyl (a synthetic opioid). Over 1.7 million people reported disorders associated with the abuse of prescription opioid pain relievers. Impairments that occur as a result of substance and drug usage have attributed to significant challenges within the public health sector.

Similarly, the adverse effects of opioids have negatively affected families, individuals, and the American community as a whole. First, the cost of addressing the effects of opioid overdose is quite high. It has affected the economy of the United States, as part of the workforce cannot attend to their daily responsibilities which in turn causes the individuals to face health-related challenges, like low living standards. Addicts mental and physical health is affected by opioid abuse, causing them to have diminished capabilities short and long term. This epidemic has cost the US taxpayers and the US government a substantial amount of money. A report from the Center for Disease Control Prevention, (CDC) estimates that opioid misuse has costs the government 78.5 dollars annually (NIH, 2019). Controlling the spread and the effects of the epidemic on the American population has been a great challenge. Besides financial implications on the government, opioid addicts can and will damage the social ties and connections between people in and around them. Parents, for instance, that are addicts may end up being negligent to their children and anyone else in the household because opioid abuse.

**Prevalence of the Epidemic**

The spread and the effects of the disease are more eminent within specific age groups and genders compared to others. According to a study by Hudgins et al. (2019), the effects of opioids are highly prevalent among the adolescent and youths despite the government’s effort to contain the situation. This study by Hudgins was analyzed by the National health survey on opioid drug abuse between 2015 and 2016. A sample size of 27,857 individuals comprising of adolescents [12 -17] years and young adults [18 – 25] years were used. The study engaged a stratified method in the classification of the participants according to their age group and environmental variations. Outcomes indicated that even though the youth and young adults were primary in opioid abuse, the means through which they acquired opioid prescriptions were unclear. It is estimated that 21 % to 29% of patients who are prescribed opioids as a medication for relieving pain misuse them (NIH, 2019). It is also approximated that 8% to 12% of the affected population develop an addition.

**Prescription of opioids**

The majority of individuals who develop an addiction to opioids are people who, at some point, received the prescription as a pain medication. Opioids are highly addictive. After the individuals have finished their prescriptions, many will start realizing that the dosage has affected them in a way that they are unable function without taking it. (Addiction Center, 2018). Only few out of the affected population will seek medical attention to address withdrawal symptoms.

**Intervention mechanisms**

The primary treatment offered to the addicts is a medication-assisted treatment that incorporates the use of medications, assistance from psychologists, and support from immediate family members. Specialized attention given to the addict involves creating a rapport with him/her to give them insight regarding the negative effects of opioid addictions. It is also crucial to encourage them to endure the challenges of withdrawal until it becomes successful in stopping opioid abuse (Mediplus, 2020). These mechanisms can help to restore an individual in normal status.

Using naloxone is another practical approach. This chemical can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose and prevent sudden deaths among the addicts. Medical experts have found that naloxone (Narran) as a short-term solution is effective before rushing the individual that overdosed to the hospital.

Collaboration between various agencies like the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), National Health Institute (NIH) and private sectors will also be of great importance in this regard. The partnership should be aimed at coming up with analgesics that cannot easily be abused by the public and to identify alternative ways in reducing pain instead of the using opioids.

Alternative non-invasive pain management therapies, as outlined below by Harvard Medical School, include. Cold and heat: These two tried-and-true methods are still the cornerstone of relieving pain for certain kinds of injuries. If a homemade hot or cold pack doesn't do the trick, try asking a physical therapist or chiropractor for their versions of these treatments, which can penetrate deeper into the muscle and tissue. Exercise: Physical activity plays a crucial role in interrupting the "vicious cycle" of pain and reduced mobility found in some chronic conditions such as arthritis and fibromyalgia. Try gentle aerobic activities such as walking, swimming, or cycling. Physical therapy and occupational therapy: These two specialties can be among your staunchest allies in the fight against pain. Physical therapists guide you through a series of exercises designed to preserve or improve your strength and mobility. Occupational therapists help you learn to perform a range of daily activities in a way that doesn't aggravate your pain. Mind-body techniques: These techniques, which include meditation, mindfulness, and breathing exercises (among many others), help you restore a sense of control over your body and turn down the "fight or flight" response, which can worsen chronic muscle tension and pain.

Yoga and tai chi: These two exercise practices incorporate breath control, meditation, and gentle movements to stretch and strengthen muscles. Many studies have shown that they can help people manage pain caused by a host of conditions, from headaches to arthritis to lingering injuries. Biofeedback: This technique involves learning relaxation and breathing exercises with the help of a biofeedback machine, which turns data on physiological functions (such as heart rate and blood pressure) into visual cues such as a graph, a blinking light, or even an animation. Watching and modifying the visualizations gives you a degree of control over your body's response to pain. Music therapy: Studies have shown that music can help relieve pain during and after surgery and childbirth. Classical music has proven to work especially well, but there's no harm in trying your favorite genre — listening to any kind of music can distract you from pain or discomfort. Therapeutic massage: Not just an indulgence, massage can ease pain by working tension out of muscles and joints, relieving stress and anxiety, and possibly helping to distract you from pain by introducing a "competing" sensation that overrides pain signals. (Harvard Health Publishing)

**Conclusion**

Opioids are well integrated into our society as the go to pain relieve aid. In order for our society to combat the addiction epidemic we need to thoroughly reassess how we treat and manage pain. Alternative therapies for pain management, reducing stigma associated with opioid addiction (so that individuals may seek treatment with less guilt), and more public oversight into the regulation and production on these pharmacological pain killers. The US Government and the FDA are responsible for ensuring that its citizens are cared for and have access to treatment options when needed.

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