
How the opioid epidemic has impacted the healthcare system



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More than 115 Americans die from opioid overdoses daily, according to [data](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The cost to deal with opioid drug abuse, including healthcare, lost productivity, criminal justice involvement and addiction treatment, has climbed to over \$78 billion a year. To say this is a large problem would be an understatement.

The opioid crisis

Although many things may have contributed to the current opioid epidemic, pharmaceutical advertising is the most prominent. Nearly 2 million Americans abused prescription opioids in 2005, according to the [American Society of Addiction Medicine](#).

Naturally, so many people addicted to opioids leads to overdoses that require medical attention. In fact, a 2011 Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) [report](#) tells us that over 1,000 patients are admitted to American hospitals daily for having misused prescription opioids.

Withdrawal also has its own set of medical problems that may include anxiety, depression, rhinorrhea, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, hypertension, tachycardia and abdominal pain. [Medically assisted treatment](#) programmes that include drugs like methadone, extended-release naltrexone and buprenorphine can help alleviate these symptoms.

Opioid epidemic's impact on hospital resources

First responders are spending more time than ever on 911 calls related to overdose incidents. This takes time away from other time-sensitive emergencies, such as strokes, heart attacks, and injuries. When first responders take longer to get to a patient, doctors and nurses may need more effort to save and rehabilitate that person. The opioid epidemic is draining resources across the board. This includes first responders, doctors, nurses and administrative staff. Over time, such a burden will increase insurance costs as insurance companies pay more to cover the increased burden.

Solutions for the current crisis

The opioid epidemic isn't going away anytime soon. Politicians must employ a multifaceted approach that includes prescription drug regulations, treatment programs and funding to address this problem at its root. In the meantime, hospitals and medical care facilities are left to deal with an increasing number of overdoses and emergency room visits.

Below are a few ways healthcare providers can help reduce the opioid epidemic's impact.

- Evaluate chronic conditions – Prescribing opioids for chronic pain can be a recipe for disaster. Patients with other high-risk conditions, such as sleep apnea, obesity, and heart failure, should not be prescribed opioids because of potential drug interactions.
- Develop and enforce strict pain management protocols – Always prescribe non-opioid painkillers when pain is mild or moderate. Consider other treatment options, including physical therapy, steroid injections, and muscle relaxers.
- Implement staff training programs – Nurses and other medical staff should be aware of the symptoms and risk factors of addiction.

The effects of the opioid epidemic are so vast that everyone feels them down to the last person. However, no one is affected quite as much as the healthcare industry. The US is spending billions of dollars to treat people who are addicted to opioid painkillers.

Although it will be a long journey to combat the opioid epidemic, everyone can do their part. Patients should remain informed and diligent when they're taking opioids. Doctors should help educate patients and prescribe opioids as a last resort. Politicians can make a major impact by enforcing policies to help reduce the number of people addicted and treat those who are currently suffering.

If everyone does their part, we will see an end to the opioid epidemic.

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