The Prescription Drug Abuse Epidemic

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Abstract

The dramatic increase in the abuse of prescription drugs has caused much concern among doctors and other health specialists. There are a few reasons why abuse rates have increased. One is the number of prescriptions being written. Another is the lack of records for patients that are prescribed medicine. Another is the lack of understanding that prescription drugs can be just as harmful as street drugs, if used the wrong way. Of course, there are also a few effects that have resulted from the increase in abuse. One effect is that prescription drug overdoses have risen with the increased rates of prescription drug abuse. Another effect is that heroin usage and overdoses have increased with increased prescription painkiller abuse. Lastly, growing prescription drug abuse rates have also caused economic burdens that include increased costs in healthcare, lost productivity, and criminal justice.

The Prescription Drug Abuse Epidemic

The most commonly abused classes of prescription drugs are stimulants, central nervous system (CNS) depressants, and opioids (America’s Addiction, 2014). The abuse rates of these drugs have reached new heights over the past few years. Since abuse rates of prescription drugs have climbed drastically, there are many questions as to how and why these rates have increased. Increased overdose deaths, increased heroin addiction, and rising economic costs are some effects that have resulted from an increase in prescription drug abuse rates. This paper will report on the current epidemic of prescription drug abuse, and its effects.
Commonly Abused Drugs

There are three main classes of drugs that are most commonly abused. These three classes include stimulants, central nervous system (CNS) depressants, and opioids.

Stimulants

Commonly used stimulants include amphetamines (e.g., Adderall) and methylphenidates (e.g., Ritalin and Concerta); and are prescribed to treat patients with attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) (Drugfacts: Stimulant, 2014). Prescribed stimulants are used to allow ADHD patients to focus more easily (Drugfacts: Stimulant, 2014). Because stimulants reduce appetite and provide a sense of increased focus, they are commonly misused for the purpose of weight loss and also to enhance performance (Drugfacts: Stimulant, 2014). There is a common misconception that the consumption of stimulants will improve a person’s ability to learn and think. Studies have shown no improvement in the ability to learn and think for those consuming the drug without ADHD symptoms (Drugfacts: Stimulant, 2014). Abusing stimulants can lead to several negative health effects. Malnutrition, along with feelings of hostility and paranoia, can result from constant abuse. In extreme doses, severe cardiovascular complications and even stroke can result (Drugfacts: Stimulant, 2014).

CNS Depressants

CNS depressants, also known as sedatives and tranquilizers, slow the activity in the brain, which makes them suitable for treating sleep disorders and anxiety (What are CNS, 2014). They are abused for their therapeutic effect of calming the body and mind. The danger with CNS depressants occurs when an abuser is abruptly withdrawn from the drug. A rebound effect occurs when dosage is reduced or withdrawn from the abuser, causing an increase in seizure activity and respiratory problems (What are the possible consequences of CNS, 2014). Another danger of abusing CNS depressants results from the mixing of other substances without the supervision of a physician. Prescription pain medicines, cold/allergy medications, and alcohol can also cause CNS depression. These should not be mixed together with CNS depressants because this can lead to an irregular heart rhythm, slowed bodily respiration, and death (Is it safe to use CNS, 2014).
Opioids

Opioid medications, such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine, and codeine, relieve pain by decreasing the strength by which pain signals reach the brain (What are opioids, 2014). Though opioids are most commonly used to relieve pain, they are abused for other reasons. Opioid medications are known for creating a feeling of pleasure and well-being in the abusers, because the regions of the brain involving reward are affected by the drug (America’s Addiction, 2014). Though the correlation between opioid overdose and respiratory depression has been identified, there is new research involving long-term effects on brain function (What are the possible consequences of opioid, 2014). Depressed respiration inhibits the amount of oxygen reaching the brain, which can lead to coma or even permanent brain damage (What are the possible consequences of opioid, 2014).

Causes of Increased Prescription Drug Abuse

The rise in prescription drug abuse is evident. Some reasons for an increased level of abuse are the environmental availability of prescription drugs and the lack of knowledge on how harmful these drugs can be.

Environmental availability

The large increase in the availability of prescription drugs can be correlated with the number of prescriptions written. The numbers of prescriptions written have risen at alarming rates. Health providers wrote nearly 259 million prescriptions for painkillers (opioids), alone, in 2012 (Cook, 2016). This is roughly enough for every individual in the United States to have his or her own bottle of prescription painkillers. The numbers have risen since 2012.

In addition to writing large numbers of prescriptions, there is also a lack of accountability on prescriptions. According to Cook (2016), a study was done observing the prescriptions filled by patients 30 days after their release from an opioid-related hospital admission. The results showed that “of those patients, 22 percent filled an opioid prescription in the month after they left the hospital” (Cook, 2016). About 1 out of every 5 of the patients was able to receive an opioid prescription just after they had been admitted to the hospital for opioid abuse. Not only is
there a large number of prescriptions being written, but there is also a lack of monitoring the prescriptions that are being written.

**Lack of Knowledge**

If taken non-medically, prescription drugs can be just as dangerous and addictive as street drugs. “According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), more than 6.5 million people above the age of 11 used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons in 2013” (Elkins, 2015). The number of people that abused cocaine (1.5 million), hallucinogens (1.3 million), and heroin (681,000) combined is less than the number of people who abused prescription drugs in 2013 (Elkins, 2015). There is a reason for these statistics. Most people believe that drugs prescribed by doctors are not as harmful as street drugs, like those listed above.

**Effects of Increased Prescription Drug Abuse**

The effects of an increase in prescription drug abuse can be seen in increased overdose death rates, addiction to heroin, and economic costs.

**Overdose Death Rates**

Over the past decade, the number of drug overdose deaths has increased greatly. Many of those overdoses resulted from prescription opioid and heroin abuse. In 2014, out of 47,055 people who died from drug overdoses, 61% were opioid related (Kounang, 2015). From 2013 to 2014, deaths from opioids rose 10% and heroin deaths rose by 26% (Kounang, 2015). Opioid drug overdose deaths have increased 200% since 2000, taking the lives of nearly half a million people (Kounang, 2015).

**Prescription Opioid Abuse Leading to Heroin Abuse**

Heroin is an illegal form of opiate drug. Studies have been performed to see if there is a link between the abuse of prescription opioids and heroin abuse. Makris (2016) states “…people addicted to prescription opioids are 40 times more likely to become addicted to heroin, according to the CDC.” People may make a transition from prescription opioids to heroin because heroin is
more easily accessible and cheaper than prescription opioids (Makris, 2016). Over the course of 14 years, heroin overdose deaths quintupled in number from 1,842 deaths in 2000 to 10,574 deaths in 2014 (Makris, 2016).

Economic Costs of Prescription Drug Abuse

There is an economic burden associated with the increase in prescription drug abuse. O’Toole (2012) reports that, according to the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, the average “doctor shopper” costs insurers between $10,000 to $15,000 a year. A study done in 2007 by the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, showed prescription abuse of painkillers (opioids) cost insurers $72.5 billion. The $72.5 billion includes expenses from emergency room visits, rehabilitation, and health problems associated with prescription abuse (O’Toole, 2012). This number has risen since then (O’Toole, 2012). Aside from healthcare costs, there is lost productivity and criminal justice costs associated with abuse. A study done in 2006 published in 2011 showed costs of $42 billion in lost productivity and $8.2 billion in total criminal justice costs associated with prescription drug abuse (O’Toole, 2012).

Conclusion

Prescription drug abuse rates have risen in recent years. Prescriptions are being written at increasing rates, without the prescribing physician knowing of previous prescriptions written for their patients. There is also a misconception that prescription drugs are safer to use than street drugs, which is not true. From the increased prescription drug abuse, overdose deaths have risen, heroin addiction and overdose has also risen, and economic burdens have increased.

References


