

Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
Hearing on “America’s Addiction to Opioids: Heroin and Prescription Drug Abuse”
Wednesday, May 14, 2014

Prepared Statement of Co-Chairman, Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa

Madam Chairman, today’s hearing is extremely timely and important. The United States is experiencing an epidemic of opioid addiction, including abuse of both heroin and prescription pain killers.

According to the 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, nearly 700,000 Americans reported using heroin in the past year. This number has been steadily increasing. The survey also estimates that nearly five million Americans were current abusers of prescription pain relievers in 2012.

The effects of this epidemic have been devastating. According to an analysis in the Journal of the American Medical Association, in 2010, three-quarters of the Americans who died from pharmaceutical drug overdoses did so while abusing opioids. Moreover, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration, heroin overdoses resulting in death increased 45% from 2006 to 2010.

My home state of Iowa hasn’t been immune from these trends. Deaths attributed to the abuse of prescription pain medication have spiked in the last decade, rising from just eight in 2003 to 52 in 2012. I know this crisis is receiving focused attention from the public health and law enforcement authorities in Iowa.

I’m glad that our hearing today will address both the abuse of heroin and prescription opioids. The two issues are linked. Once some people get hooked on prescription pain killers, they often turn to heroin, which is much cheaper.

The abuse of these types of drugs is a problem that I have been concerned about for some time. In 2010, I worked with Senator Klobuchar to pass the Secure and Responsible Drug Disposal Act. This law allows for communities to establish prescription drug “take back” programs, so patients can safely dispose of old or unused medicines.

Indeed, according to the most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health, over two-thirds of those who abuse prescription drugs obtain them through a friend or relative for whom the drug was legally prescribed.

In addition, last year, Senator Feinstein and I learned about the existence of a database of doctors maintained by Purdue Pharmaceuticals. Purdue markets OxyContin, one of the most abused prescription opioids. The database allegedly contained information about doctors who engaged in reckless prescribing practices.

Our investigation revealed that many state medical boards, as well as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, didn’t know about this database. We encouraged these

organizations, as well as the DEA, to contact Purdue about it. As a result, information is now in the hands of authorities who can take action against irresponsible doctors.

The purpose of this hearing is to learn more about what else is being done to combat this epidemic, and what role Congress can play. A multifaceted approach makes common sense.

Prevention efforts, through which doctors and the public are educated about the dangerousness of opioids and all addictive drugs, should be part of the solution. That is precisely why the mixed signals the Obama Administration is sending to young people about marijuana use are so damaging. Young people, and all those looking to climb up the ladder of opportunity in America, don't need another pathway to addiction. But that is what the Administration is providing by failing to enforce federal law and dismissing marijuana use as just another bad habit.

Treatment for those who have become addicted is also a part of the solution, as well. And a drug called Naloxone has shown effectiveness in countering the effects of heroin overdoses.

And finally, law enforcement will have a critical role to play. Of course, we can't arrest our way out of this crisis. But we can maintain the current law enforcement tools to go after those who are trafficking heroin into our nation and our communities.

Unfortunately, the sentencing reform bill the Obama Administration is supporting does just the opposite. The proposed Smarter Sentencing Act that recently passed out of the Judiciary Committee cuts the mandatory minimum sentences for those who manufacture, import, or distribute heroin in half. These are penalties for dealers, not users. In the midst of an epidemic, this makes no sense.

Federal prosecutors themselves wrote that the current system of penalties is the "cornerstone" of their ability "to infiltrate and dismantle large-scale drug trafficking organizations and to take violent armed career criminals off the streets." I don't want to remove this cornerstone, least of all now.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses and working with you, Madam Chairman, to help protect the health and safety of our communities from this epidemic.