

Hijacked by Opioids

continued ▲ from front

addicts, using over 80 percent of the world's opioid supply. Prescription pills are now the drug of choice for first-time drug users over the age of 12.

"It is an epidemic in this country right now," said Dr. Gregory H. Pierce, a Pennsylvania doctor and author of the recently published, *Addiction to Prescription Pain Killers and the Street Drug Heroin*.

For a population living in an overworked, fast-paced, and financially-burdened society, immediate gratification is an alluring method to cope with stress. Mind-altering chemicals seem to meet that need.

Whether young people knowingly consume prescription pills to relieve social anxieties, or adults unknowingly dose themselves for chronic pain relief, the brains of Americans, young and old are in danger of being hijacked one bottle of doctor-prescribed opioids at a time.

The misuse of opioids causes large releases of dopamine, sensations of pleasure in the brain, wjocj create euphoria of such intensity that it resets the brain to



PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Overdoses of opioids, a synthetic version of opium, caused 11,499 deaths in 2007, more than heroin and cocaine combined.

believing that opioids are necessary to survive.

Once the brain chemistry is al-

tered, said Dr. Pierce, "you no longer have a choice. You become addicted. You react on impulse. Your only function is to obtain pleasure."

Ashurex realized how fiercely painkillers had taken control of his mind and body when he tried to stop.

Since quitting his job as a regional sales consultant two years ago to get help, Ashurex has battled his addiction every day. Even with family support and health-insured treatments, he can only stay clean for 3 to 4 month stretches, until he loses control again.

"If you don't take them, you literally cannot live without them," said Ashurex. Obtaining and using pills became a survival instinct, "You don't care about work, family, or friends. You will rob, cheat, and steal to get them."

In one year, Ashurex spent \$60,000 dollars on pills alone. He sold his laptop and his car. He burned through a decent 401k. At rock bottom, he said, "If I had \$20, and I could go buy a pill or put gas in my car, I would go buy that pill and hope I didn't run out of gas."

Ashurex said he never went more than a day or two without being able to find pills. Often, users buy pills from numerous different doctors that prescribe them the same drugs or drug dealers who do the same. Easy access to pills is one avenue that allows many people to stay hooked.

Though every doctor has different standards, which may be part of the problem, Dr. Pierce says better education for the patient about the

specific effects of pain killers and how to take them correctly can help lessen the likelihood of addiction.

He prescribes non-narcotics first to those with chronic pain before moving them to stronger medicine. Encouraging patients to change unhealthy lifestyles through alternative therapies is another way he works with patients before rushing for a prescription.

Dr. Pierce says he avoids prescribing to "red flag" patients who may ask for narcotics first, demand a specific medication, or run out of supplies early or lose their prescriptions. He also considers the type of injury that might warrant pain medication, such as a twisted ankle versus a herniated disc.

Such methods may not hurt, but both Dr. Pierce and Ashurex agree doctors should have access to a database that monitors how many doctors an individual is receiving pain medication from. That way, one person could not obtain the same prescriptions from various doctors.

Tarek Ashurex is frustrated that doctors and the pharmaceutical companies who supply them are not being held responsible. He is also annoyed that it is costing him so much to get treatment for a chemical dependence that he cannot control.

He said, "When you hit rock bottom, you don't have any money left, you've already spent it all on drugs." Ashurex says most Methadone or Suboxone clinics, two common treatments for opioid abuse treatments, are expensive and have wait lists up to six months long.

"Fortunately, I come from a middle

class family with decent health insurance, but a lot of people don't have the support to pay for these places," said Ashurex.

He believes that affordable treatment is hard to come by because opioid dependence is stigmatized as a white-collar drug addiction, so those who can afford the drugs in the first place should be able to pay their way out of it.

After calling more than 50 opiate addiction specialists in Oregon, Ashurex found most doctors could not see patients until after Christmas. He desperately wants help, but says he is taking pills again "just so I can survive".

Ashurex also sees a psychotherapist for severe anxiety and rampant depression that have worsened from prescription pill use. The mental battle takes a toll on him. He often feels worthless and lethargic.

He wishes that initially, he would have just taken Ibuprofen and dealt with the pain in his shoulder, instead of masking the pain with pills, which in the end, caused him to tear up his shoulder more.

"Not only am I an opiate addict, but I have a left shoulder that never healed properly."

Ashurex says he is not ashamed of his addiction because he never asked for it. This week he started treatment at a Methadone clinic and is paying \$120 a week. He will not see a specialist until November.

He hopes the money spent will help him get better and lead a happy, productive live, but he is not completely convinced, "The journey has just started," he said.

One Year Anniversary



Showdogs is a full service salon. We do baths, all over hair cuts, tooth brushing, nail trims, soft claws, flea treatments, mud baths, and ear cleaning. We also have health care and grooming products to keep your pet clean in between visits.

Show Dogs Grooming Salon & Boutique

926 N. Lombard
Portland, OR 97217
503-283-1177

Tuesday-Saturday 9am-7pm
Monday 10am-4pm

*Yo dawg is gonna look like a show dawg
and your kitty will be pretty.*