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OUR VIEW

Defeating the devil

We can't legislate our way out of it.
We can't shame our way out of it.
We can't prescribe our way out of it.
We can't execute our way out of it.
We can't wish our way out of it.

The opioid epidemic is not a simple riddle with an "aha" answer waiting to be discovered.

It is a problem as old as mankind. The human brain was designed to protect us from danger by sending pain signals as a warning. But with the advent of modern medicine we've lost our tolerance for pain, and by discovering new ways to block it we've crossed another wire that's triggering unintended consequences.

As Dr. Joel Rice explained at the Eastern Oregon Forum on opioid addiction Tuesday, the cognitive part of the brain is hijacked by a dopamine-seeking cells he dubbed the "rat brain," which will do whatever it takes to acquire the pleasure stimuli it has become accustomed to. It's the same process that creates addiction to alcohol, nicotine, gambling or sex, but with opioids the dopamine hit is so

strong that it very quickly escalates into a life-or-death problem.

The angel and demon on opposite shoulders might be the best way to understand it, but instead of each getting equal chance to make a case the devil has a hardwired ability to override the angel's protests.

While we scientifically understand more about addiction and withdrawal than ever before, as a society we still struggle with addicts. Our patience runs out quickly, even those in the psychiatric field, as Dr. Rice explained. Kicking a habit is seen as a moral victory, so we treat failure to do so as a moral failure, and we assign the actions and words of the addicted brain to the person suffering from the ailment.

And for lack of treatment, someone in this country dies every 20 minutes from a prescription opioid overdose. Drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental death in the U.S., and 40 percent are from prescription pain relievers while another 20 percent is due to heroin, a substitute illegal opioid often obtained when a legitimate source



AP file photo
An arrangement of pills of the opioid oxycodone-acetaminophe.

of the drug runs out.

It's not a somewhere else problem. Dr. Rice gets a flood of people from all walks of life who have been hooked on pain relievers and want desperately to be off. Two members of the forum panel who now work in health care spoke about their own past addictions, and police chief Stuart Roberts spoke about the daily interaction his officers have with addicts in the midst of criminal activity to feed the habit.

There is hope, though.

Doctors who once wrote extended

prescriptions for oxycodone or hydrocodone are being more careful with the notepad, Dr. Rice said, and addiction specialists have begun offering Suboxone, which is more easily tapered off. The first step of cutting off the source for this particular addiction is being addressed.

Law enforcement are also receiving Narcan kits, medication that stops an overdose in its tracks. It's protection for officers, who are at risk of fatal contact with fentanyl in particular, but also for an addict in the middle of an overdose. The drug quite frankly can save a life, and provide another chance to beat the addiction.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden has also championed the cause, hosting roundtables in his rural district and returning to Washington with the promise of freeing up more federal funding to address the problem. This week Congress passed a \$4 billion spending bill to fund prevention, treatment and enforcement, which included \$130 million for the Rural Communities Opioid Response program and \$1 billion in new grants available to the states and Indian tribes.

There is no magic pill to defeat this pill-popping problem. But a combination of education, legislation and real dollars can make a sizable dent on the age-old battle.

OTHER VIEWS

Speaking as a white male ...

How much are you in control of your own opinions? I ask this sincerely because, as you'll see, I'm trying to think this through and I'm not sure how.

If you go back to the intellectuals of the 1950s, you get the impression that they thought individuals could very much determine their own beliefs. People like Hannah Arendt and Irving Howe believed that if you stood alone and researched carefully and hard, you could transcend your own background and render independent and objective judgments about society.

Writers like George Orwell believed that experience was more important than identity, that if you put yourself in other people's shoes, you could feel what other groups were feeling and communicate that experience. Lionel Trilling put great faith in imagination, certain that Shakespeare could capture the experience of being a woman, though he was not a woman.

Busy fighting communism and fascism, people back then emphasized individual reason and were deeply allergic to groupthink.

We don't think this way anymore, and in fact thinking this way can get you into trouble. I guess the first step was the rise of perspectivism. This is the belief, often traced back to Nietzsche, that what you believe is determined by where you stand: Our opinions are not guided by objective truth, because there is no such thing; they are guided by our own spot in society.

Then came Michel Foucault and critical race theorists and the rest, and the argument that society is structured by elites to preserve their privilege. Beliefs and culture are part of the structure elites use to preserve that inequality. This led, in the common parlance, to the assumption that your beliefs are determined by your group's privilege or lack of privilege, by where your group is within the power structure.

Now we are at a place where it is commonly assumed that your perceptions are something that come to you through your group, through your demographic identity. How many times have we all heard somebody rise up in conversation and say, "Speaking as a Latina. ..." or "Speaking as a queer person. ..." or "Speaking as a Jew. ...?"

Now, when somebody says that I always wonder, What does that mean? After you've stated your group identity, what is the therefore that follows?

We've shifted from an emphasis on individual judgment toward a greater emphasis on collective experience. I notice that even in my own line of work. When I started, it was very important for opinion writers to never think of themselves as a Republican or a Democrat. We were individual inquirers, not polemicists for some political team. Over the years, many people stopped making that distinction.

Today, group labels matter a lot. When



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

you read discussions of op-ed writers you see that we're often not thought of as individual thinkers, but as spokesmen who are here to represent a point of view. People get upset when a certain group is not represented on the page.

I'm searching for a line here, a distinction. Under what circumstances should we embrace the idea that collective identity shapes our thinking? Under what circumstances should we resist

collective identity and insist on the primacy of individual discretion, and our common humanity?

On the one hand, the drive to bring in formerly marginalized groups has obviously been one of the great achievements of our era. When you put together a panel discussion or a work team, even on a subject like oncology, you don't want to have a bunch of white males sitting up there. We know that something valuable will be lost.

Wider inclusion has vastly improved public debate. For example, in the 1990s, African-Americans strongly supported tougher criminal justice laws. Now opinion has shifted and a majority of African-Americans strongly oppose them. That shift, born out of a direct and unique experience, reveals that, say, mandatory minimum sentencing laws have had harsh unintended effects.

But other times, group identity seems irrelevant to many issues. How does being gay shape your view of U.S.-Russian relations or breaking up big tech? How does being Latina influence how you read a black writer like St. Augustine?

And there are other times when collective thinking seems positively corrupting. Why are people's views of global warming, genetically modified foods and other scientific issues strongly determined by political label? That seems ridiculous.

I'm a columnist and I'm supposed to come to a conclusion, but I'm confused.

Our whole education system is based on the idea that we train individuals to be critical thinkers. Our political system is based on the idea that persuasion and deliberation lead to compromise and toward truth. The basis of human dignity is our capacity to make up our own minds. One of the things I've learned in a lifetime in journalism is that people are always more unpredictable than their categories.

But the notion that group membership determines opinion undermines all that. If it's just group against group, deliberation is a sham, beliefs are just masks groups use to preserve power structures, and democracy is a fraud. The epistemological foundation of our system is in surprisingly radical flux.

David Brooks has been a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*, a contributing editor at *Newsweek* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, and he is currently a commentator on *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*.



OTHER VIEWS

Walden must work to legalize marijuana

By KRIS CRAIG

For the East Oregonian

George Washington, William Shakespeare and Carl Sagan may be some of history's greatest minds and most celebrated figures, but they'd all probably be in prison today if they were still alive.

What would make these unlikely cell mates so dangerous that they'd have to be kept off the streets? Was Shakespeare a serial arsonist? Did Carl Sagan fly into a homicidal rage whenever somebody claimed to have invented a perpetual motion machine? No, the threat these historical icons posed to the public is much worse: They all smoked marijuana.

The idea that cannabis is a dangerous substance that should be avoided at all cost is a relatively modern invention. In fact, historians now believe that Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II regularly used marijuana, possibly to relieve eye pain. But if cannabis has indeed been in use for millennia, why has there never been a single recorded instance of a person dying of a marijuana overdose? Think about that for a moment: In thousands of years of recorded history, not one person has ever died of THC poisoning, yet the federal government maintains that marijuana is among the most dangerous substances in existence. People die each year from overdosing on prescription pain killers, alcohol, tobacco and even water. Nevertheless, a plant that has never directly killed anyone is far more dangerous than all those things, according to the feds.

Just how dangerous is it? In order to die of a marijuana overdose, a person would have to consume at least 1,500 pounds of cannabis within 15 minutes. Newer studies suggest it'd take even more

than that. Unfortunately, the alcohol, drug, and tobacco industries are spending millions of dollars to make sure Congress continues to treat marijuana as the world's deadliest poison so they don't have to compete with a new industry.

Let's examine how your member of Congress is holding up in the face of all this dirty money flying around. Congressman Greg Walden has taken more than \$215,000 in campaign contributions from these companies, more than most members of Congress. Walden has accepted more money from the drug companies and more contributions even from the slimy tobacco companies than any other member of the Oregon congressional delegation.

Seeing as how these special interests are determined to use the power of government to prevent legitimate competition from cannabis from cutting into their profits, it stands to reason that all the money they've lavished upon your member of Congress came with the expectation that they were purchasing his vote against any legalization bill.

Not since prohibition has the federal government pursued a policy so rooted in deliberate misinformation and outright hypocrisy. It is truly embarrassing that we, as a society, have for so long allowed ourselves to be manipulated into conflating the consumption of a relatively harmless plant with a lack of morality.

It's time to end the stupidity and stop wasting taxpayer money on filling our prisons with people who have absolutely no business being there. That's why I urge you to call Congressman Walden at 202-225-6730 and tell him to either legalize cannabis federally or make room for someone who will.

Kris Craig is a writer. He lives in College Place.

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