

Fight Against Prescription Drug Abuse May Have Fueled Heroin Use: Experts



Some addiction experts say the U.S. government's fight against prescription drug abuse may have inadvertently contributed to the rise in heroin use, according to *The Washington Post*.

Now that some pain medications are less available and more expensive, many people who used to abuse those drugs have switched to heroin, which is cheaper.

The crackdown on "pill mills" has helped to reduce the illegal use of medications, the article notes. But many people who had abused prescription opioids simply switched to heroin, which provides a comparable, euphoric high.

"Absolutely, much of the heroin use you're seeing now is due in large part to making prescription opioids a lot less accessible," said Theodore Cicero of Washington University in St. Louis, who co-authored a 2012 study that found OxyContin abuse decreased after the painkiller was reformulated to make it more difficult to misuse. Many people who abused the drug have switched to heroin, according to the study.

The study included more than 2,500 people who were dependent on opioids, who were followed between July 2009 and March 2012.

During that time, there was a 17 percent decrease in OxyContin abuse. In 2010, the company that makes OxyContin introduced a new version of the drug that is more difficult to inhale or inject. During the same period, heroin abuse doubled.

According to Cicero, the government could have taken steps sooner against heroin use, such as by promoting the use of medicines to fight overdoses and ease symptoms of withdrawal.

Not everyone agrees that the crackdown on prescription drug abuse has led to the rise in heroin use. Joseph T. Rannazzisi, who runs the Drug Enforcement Administration's Office of Diversion Control, told the newspaper, "I don't think one thing has anything to do with the other." He noted

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many lives have been saved by the effort to reduce prescription drug abuse.