

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

DRUG ADDICTION FROM YOUR MEDICINE CABINET?

Is the threat of drug addiction lurking in your medicine cabinet?

This year, a presentation on drug addiction astounded me. The American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyers Assistance Programs (CoLAP) hosts an annual week-long national conference. It's the premier event for collectively addressing the challenges Lawyers Assistance Programs face while confidentially assisting impaired lawyers, judges and their family members into treatment and recovery. Each year, renowned experts provide updates on the ever-evolving sciences of addiction and mental illness.

Dr. Marvin D. Seppala, MD and chief medical officer of the Hazelden Foundation, made a presentation at CoLAP 2011 titled "Just Give Me Some More" (pain medication) that focused on Opioid Addiction, Chronic Pain Management, and the stunning prevalence of Opioid abuse in the United States.

According to Dr. Seppala,¹ prescription pain medications, most particularly drugs containing Oxycodone, are now the fourth most abused substances in the United States, falling only behind tobacco, alcohol and marijuana.

Oxycodone is an Opioid, which is the scientific term for synthetic Opiates. Opioid prescription medications include Morphine, Codeine, Oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin, Percodan, Percocet), and related pain management drugs.

Dr. Seppala explained that Opioid drug use has skyrocketed in the United States. Between 1997 and 2005, Opioid users in the United States have increased from 4 million to more than 30 million. Most troubling, between 1999 and 2002, the number of Opioid poisonings (overdoses) on death certificates increased 91.2 percent, vastly outpacing heroin and cocaine poisonings at 12.4 percent and 22.8 percent, respectively.

Why is widespread prescription pain medication abuse and addiction occurring? Dr. Seppala suggests: "Physicians have little training in addiction and little training in chronic pain. Yet pain is the most common reason for a primary care visit, and addiction

is one of the most common illnesses seen in primary care."

On the patient side of the equation, misinformation fuels prescription medication abuse and addiction among teenagers in particular. According to Dr. Seppala, many U.S. teenagers believe prescription medications are "safe," non-addictive, and that there is nothing wrong with using them without a prescription.

To drive home the point, Dr. Seppala related a case wherein an 18-year-old football player sustained a minor elbow injury and his doctor prescribed Vicodin (containing Oxycodone). The young man shared the drug recreationally with his teammates. The end result was that five young men became drug addicts hooked on Oxycodone.

As a family law practitioner, I witnessed a young mother's battle with Oxycodone. The grip of the drug was so devastatingly powerful that she lost custody of her young children as a result of her continued abuse of the substance. After a long battle, she was able to beat the addiction, but not everyone is so fortunate.

Passionate opponents of Oxycodone (brand named "OxyContin") seek to outlaw the drug entirely. In 2006, Massachusetts Congressman Stephen Lynch (D-South Boston) unsuccessfully introduced legislation seeking to ban the commercial sale of OxyContin. Congressman Lynch cited addiction, overdoses, criminal activity, and the ease of negating the drug's time-release property to achieve a strong heroin-like effect as reasons to ban OxyContin.

Patients suffering acute pain and their treating physicians, however, claim that Oxycodone is a miracle drug that provides unprecedented relief. They contend that abusers of the drug, no matter how prevalent, should not be allowed to dictate medical practices.

After his proposed OxyContin ban failed, Congressman Lynch ultimately won support for a study on OxyContin's addictive properties so as to identify how legitimate medicinal uses of Opioid painkillers can be better balanced against the massive problems caused by the drug's abuse.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse maintains that properly managed, *short-term* medical use of Oxycodone rarely causes addiction.

No matter how you view the ongoing controversy, it is inescapable that Opioid prescription pain medications can be severely addictive and dangerous, even when used for legitimate medical purposes. As such, the medical use of Opioid drugs should be carefully monitored by a doctor who understands addiction.

To guard against abuse and addiction, Dr. Seppala recommends that the source of a patient's pain be addressed as quickly as possible to minimize exposure to Opioid prescription pain medications.

Other safe practices include having an adult monitor the patient's use of the drug to ensure it is taken as prescribed and only if truly needed. Unused portions of the prescription should be destroyed so as to prevent any future misuse or abuse.

If you have concerns about prescription pain medication addiction, call the Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) for a referral to a doctor who specializes in addiction. If you need further information about LAP's confidential services regarding mental illness, addiction, depression, burnout or stress, contact LAP at (866)354-9334 or email LAP@louisianalap.com. Your call is confidential as a matter of law and you do not have to give your name.

FOOTNOTE

1. Dr. Seppala's CoLAP materials and supporting citations are available online at: <http://apps.americanbar.org/legal/services/colap/nosearch/conference-materials.html>.

J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell is the executive director of the Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP) and can be reached at (866)354-9334 or via e-mail at LAP@louisianalap.com.

