

The Opioid Epidemic:

What you need to know to keep your employees safe



The epidemic of opioid addiction and opioid related death continues to rise and pose a threat. During the *Benefits and Pensions Monitor Meetings & Events* session ‘The Opioid Epidemic: What you need to know to keep your employees safe,’ Dr. Dorian Lo, president of Express Scripts Canada, compared the scale of the current opioid crisis to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

“For the last year that we have data, there were 7,224 deaths from opioids. When we compare that to the previous five years, there were 26,690 deaths in total, or around 5,300 deaths per year, on average,” said Lo. “Over the last two plus years, with COVID in Canada, there have been more than 41,000 deaths – a staggering 386% increase.”

What makes the situation more dangerous is that it can be hard to identify who is being affected by this epidemic as people dealing with opioid related issues can be regular productive members of society, said Lo. “These people look just like you and I, productive members of society. If you were to pass them on the street, you would not know.”

Epidemic 20 Years In The Making

Dr. Yelena Chorny, chief of addiction and trauma services at Homewood Health Centre, dissected how the current opioid epidemic can be traced back to the 1980s where the study and treatment of pain became an area of specialization in medicine. Good research was being done during this time and various treatment options were being used and developed. However, many of the options were resource intensive and very expensive.

This led to Oxycontin coming on the market in 1996. It was marketed as a safe and effective treatment for pain. However, in the early 2000s, questions started arising over the safety of the drug. “What became quickly apparent to those on the ground – who were seeing significant rates of addiction, overdose, and death – was that these claims about lower misuse or addiction potential were false,” said Chorny.

This led to more polices being put in place to restrict who could be prescribed

these drugs as well as safer options such as OxyNeo being prescribed instead of oxycontin. Despite these changes, addiction numbers continued to rise, with a majority of issues being reported from individuals who were receiving a 10-day supply, yet were still using the drug a year later or individuals who were taking alternatives that were more dangerous like fentanyl patches.

New Guidelines

In 2017, new guidelines were established that addressed lowering the dosages prescribed, but, in turn, other drugs were being prescribed with higher dosages. This is when an important shift in the opioid crisis began. “This marked the point at which our epidemic shifted from one primarily related to prescription access to one of street drug,” said Chorny.



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Today’s problem consists of a toxic drug supply and important steps need to be taken to address this epidemic.

“When we’re looking at ways to limit opioid prescriptions and thinking about the risks to new users, that’s going to be a very different intervention. Someone who is a chronic opioid user might need to undergo a slow taper or be switched to a different kind of medication,” said Chorny.

Understanding the different types of opioids available as well as what they are used for is important to understanding the current situation. Anu Sharda, senior

product strategy leader at Express Scripts Canada, said while the primary use of opioids is for pain management, they are also prescribed for treating things such as coughs and diarrhea.

“The prevalence of opioid usage accounts for approximately \$30 million in direct spending across approximately one million claims,” as seen across Express Scripts Canada book of business, said Sharda. About 13 per cent of claimants have had at least one opioid drug claim.

In 2019, Express Scripts Canada launched an opioid management solution that focuses on minimizing early opioid exposure and helping to prevent progression to overuse and potentially abuse. The program encourages short-acting opioids over long-acting ones especially in patients who are first starting to use opioid treatments. Since then, it has enhanced the program to address all opioid users as part of a more comprehensive and proactive strategy.

“Our program philosophy is twofold,” said Sharda. “It’s primarily focused on addressing member safety and secondarily it’s supporting pharmacists through the dispensing process with alerts and notifications.”

Manulife Opioid Management Program

Alex Carducci, product director for pharmacy benefits at Manulife Financial, said comprehensive medication reviews with clinical pharmacists, as well as pharmacogenomics, the study of genes to determine how someone will respond to medication, are two key areas when designing plans.

Its current opioid management program with Express Scripts Canada has become more effective with further enhancements such as being able to show sponsors data on the benefits of the program on a policy level.

In terms of results from the current program, since April 2019 it has seen a decrease in prescriptions for unnecessary opioids and two times the risk reduction of long-term opioid use with the program’s seven-day initial supply limit. This really showcases the positive impact the program has had.

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