

OXYCONTIN ABUSE: A TEENAGER'S STORY

OxyContin: Hillbilly Heroin

Did you know . . .

OxyContin has many street names, such as "o.c.," "oxy," "oxycotton," "cotton," and "hillbilly heroin."

Further Research

Perdue Pharma is a specialist in chronic pain medication. To see how the company responds to the abuse of some of its products, visit www.pharma.com/pressroom/app/newsannounc/ss10ptPlan.asp. Outline your reaction to the company's Ten Point Plan to curb abuse.

Quote

"Three days of being on [oxycodone], and you become addicted. It's a very, very powerful drug." — a Cape Breton user quoted by Charlie Gillis in "Illicit Trade in OxyContin Plagues Atlantic Provinces," *Maclean's*, May 24, 2004

OxyContin is the brand name for Perdue Pharma's version of oxycodone. Perhaps you've heard that it's just heroin in a different form. It *is* similar. Both heroin and oxycodone are derivatives of opium, which is collected from the opium poppy.

Opiate drugs such as morphine, codeine, and oxycodone are highly valued for their medicinal qualities. They short-circuit the body's chemical balance, and artificially stimulate pleasure centres in the brain. This numbs or desensitizes the body to bring relief to people suffering from intense pain. Morphine is the strongest pain reliever we have.

OxyContin was approved for use in Canada in 1996. It is more potent than codeine but less potent than morphine. OxyContin tablets are designed to release their dosage over a number of hours. The stronger dosages of OxyContin contain a potent dose of drugs, but the time-release design ensures that a pain sufferer receives it gradually as the tablet dissolves slowly in the digestive system.

Abusers short-circuit the time-release mechanism because they want the whole effect of the drug all at once. They smash the pills and snort the powder into their nasal cavities. Others dissolve the tablets in water, filter out any solid materials, and then inject the drug into their veins. Some say that the high that results rivals the effect of heroin.

Addiction

Unfortunately, opiate drugs are extremely addictive. As a person uses the drug, they gradually build up a toler-

ance. As time goes by, some users must take increasingly higher doses to achieve the same effect—either for pain relief or for a high. Fully addicted users are driven by overwhelming cravings for the drug. All else that was important in their lives—their family, friends, passions, interests—falls away as powerful drug cravings take over.

If the users try to stop, they go through withdrawal. Withdrawal symptoms can vary, but they include cold sweats, heart palpitations, diarrhea, pain, nausea, and severe stomach cramps. In severe cases, withdrawal can include seizures, convulsions, and death.

Getting Oxycodone

Unlike many street drugs, oxycodone is not produced illegally. Drug companies produce and distribute it legally through hospitals and pharmacies. Physicians prescribe it to patients who are suffering from acute pain or to people whom they *think* are experiencing acute pain. People can fake pain. And they can keep insisting that the pain is getting worse so they can get ever-stronger prescriptions of the drug.

Then there is the practice of double doctoring. In this case, someone gets a prescription to deal with the pain of, say, a minor injury. Then he or she goes to another doctor to get a similar prescription. And then another and another. Patients like this get many prescriptions for the same drug and then use it recreationally or sell it to someone who will sell it as a street drug.

A Growing Problem

In some rural areas of the United States

and Canada, OxyContin has become popular. It's even overtaken cocaine and marijuana as the recreational drug of choice in these areas. And then there are the drug overdoses. People tend to make mistakes with drugs. They take OxyContin in combination with other drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana, codeine, butalbital, and cocaine. Even on its own, OxyContin can be deadly if a user takes too much too quickly. Even one dose has the potential to stop a person's breathing. And if injected with a shared needle, it may just end life the long way—with HIV/AIDS.

After OxyContin went on the market in 1996, the black-market trade in the tablets swept through rural areas in West Virginia, Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maine. In the year 2000, in the state of Kentucky alone, 59 people died from OxyContin-related overdoses. About 35 died in Maine from the same cause. Then, in 2001, the deaths started in Newfoundland. Since 2001, six deaths in the province were related

to the drug. "Cotton" had come to Canada.

The problem of Oxycontin abuse is also rampant in rural areas of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the area around Sydney, Glace Bay, and North Sydney is known as "Cottonland." Why here? Like the rural areas of the eastern states where OxyContin trade is rampant, communities here are the shells of once-thriving coal-mining towns. Miners with painful disabilities live here and have access to OxyContin. Yet they don't have much money because the coal mines shut down long ago. Some are selling the drug as a source of income.

At the same time, Perdu Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, has been accused of encouraging the use of OxyContin for ailments that are not serious. In the United States, Perdu is facing 300 lawsuits regarding this type of aggressive marketing.

Analysis

1. What is OxyContin?
2. What is it produced for?
3. How is it abused?
4. How do people obtain it?
5. What is its impact?
6. A fact is something that can be proven. An opinion expresses a point of view. Different people can have different opinions about a topic, but the facts related to a topic do not change. Consider the following statements. Which are facts and which are opinions?
 - "OxyContin must be safe because doctors prescribe it, right?"
 - "If used inappropriately, OxyContin can kill you."
 - "59 people in Kentucky died of OxyContin-related overdoses."
 - "I don't know anybody who died of snorting Cotton. It must be safe."
 - "Perdu Pharma couldn't possibly be responsible."