

## Commentary

January 10, 2011

### *The Obama Administration Addresses Prescription Drug Abuse, the New Drug Epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

New data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) shows that visits by individuals to hospital emergency rooms involving the misuse or abuse of pharmaceutical drugs have nearly doubled over the past five years, totaling 1.2 million in 2009.<sup>1</sup> The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) Director Gil Kerlikowske announced that the Obama Administration is mounting an unprecedented government-wide effort to combat this public health epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

The implications of this new data on prescription-based emergency room visits are astounding. In 17 states overdose deaths now exceed all highway fatalities.<sup>3</sup> The number of highway deaths has steadily declined while overdose deaths are sharply increasing. Overdoses due to prescription opioids have tripled from 1996 to 2006 and are now the leading cause of fatal overdose, surpassing deaths due to heroin and cocaine.<sup>4 5</sup>

Nonmedical use of prescription drugs is a major public health threat. In 2009, past 30 day nonmedical use of prescription drugs by persons age 12 and older reached 7 million.<sup>6</sup>

To address the epidemic of prescription drug abuse, the Obama Administration is committed to increasing prescription drug return, take-back and disposal programs across the country, expanding state-based prescription monitoring programs, educating prescribers about opiate painkiller prescribing, and assisting states in cracking down on doctor shopping and "pill mills."<sup>7</sup>

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) applauds ONDCP for implementing new strategies to reduce prescription drug abuse in the US. In addition to the strategies outlined, IBH suggests encouraging pharmaceutical companies to produce abuse-resistance formulas for prescription drugs and to work cooperatively with other manufacturers and with the Federal government to monitor product-specific rates of nonmedical use to ensure that abuse-resistant formulations are truly abuse-resistant and to better target the products that have especially high levels of nonmedical use relative to their rates of medical use. Pharmaceutical companies should begin this process by focusing on the development of new abuse-resistant formulations for opioid analgesics, the most widely abused variety of prescription drugs, and the medicines creating the high rates of overdose deaths.

Prescription drug abuse is the defining drug problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With leadership from the Federal government, the US can successfully reduce prescription drug abuse through new policies in medicine, law, and enforcement with a strong focus on prevention while preserving legitimate access to these often useful medicines.

For more information about the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc., visit [www.ibhinc.org](http://www.ibhinc.org).

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**First Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) 1973 to 1978**

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<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (December 28, 2010). *The DAWN Report: Highlights of the 2009 Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) Findings on Drug-Related Emergency Department Visits*. Rockville, MD.

<sup>2</sup> Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2011, January 6). New data reveal doubling of emergency department visits involving pharmaceutical abuse. Retrieved January 7, 2011 from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press11/010611.html>

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press. (2009, Oct. 30). Drug deaths outpace car crashes in more states. Retrieved January 7, 2011 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33091645/ns/health-addictions/>

<sup>4</sup> Szabo, L. (2010, August 19). Prescriptions now biggest cause of fatal drug overdoses. *USA Today*. Retrieved January 7, 2011 from [http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-09-30-drug-overdose\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-09-30-drug-overdose_N.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Paulozzi, L.J., Budnitz, D.S., & Xi, Y. (2006). Increasing deaths from opioid analgesics in the United States. *Pharmacoepidemiology & Drug Safety*, 15(9), 618-627.

<sup>6</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2010). Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Volume I. Summary of National Findings (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-38A, HHS Publication No. SMA 10-4586Findings). Rockville, MD.

<sup>7</sup> Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2011, January 6). New data reveal doubling of emergency department visits involving pharmaceutical abuse. Retrieved January 7, 2011 from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press11/010611.html>