

Commentary

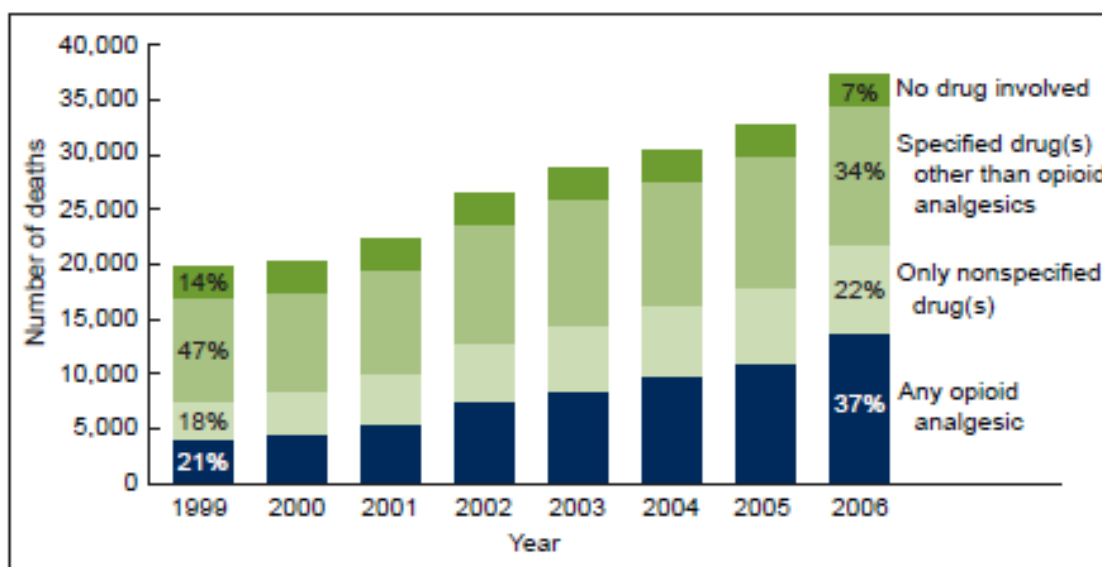
October 7, 2009

Prescription Drug Use is Leading Cause of Overdose Deaths

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) announced that opioid analgesics (or painkillers) are now the primary cause of overdose deaths in the United States. Deaths related to these painkillers have tripled from 1999 to 2006, rising from 4,000 to 13,800. The national number of overdose deaths grew to 39,000, nearly doubling since in this time with opioid painkillers contributing to almost 40% of all overdose deaths (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Figure 1. Poisoning deaths involving opioid analgesics, other drugs, and no drugs: United States, 1999–2006



NOTE: Access data table for Figure 1 at http://ftp.cdc.gov/pub/Health_Statistics/NCHS/Publications/Data_Briefs/db022/fig01.xls.
SOURCE: CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System.

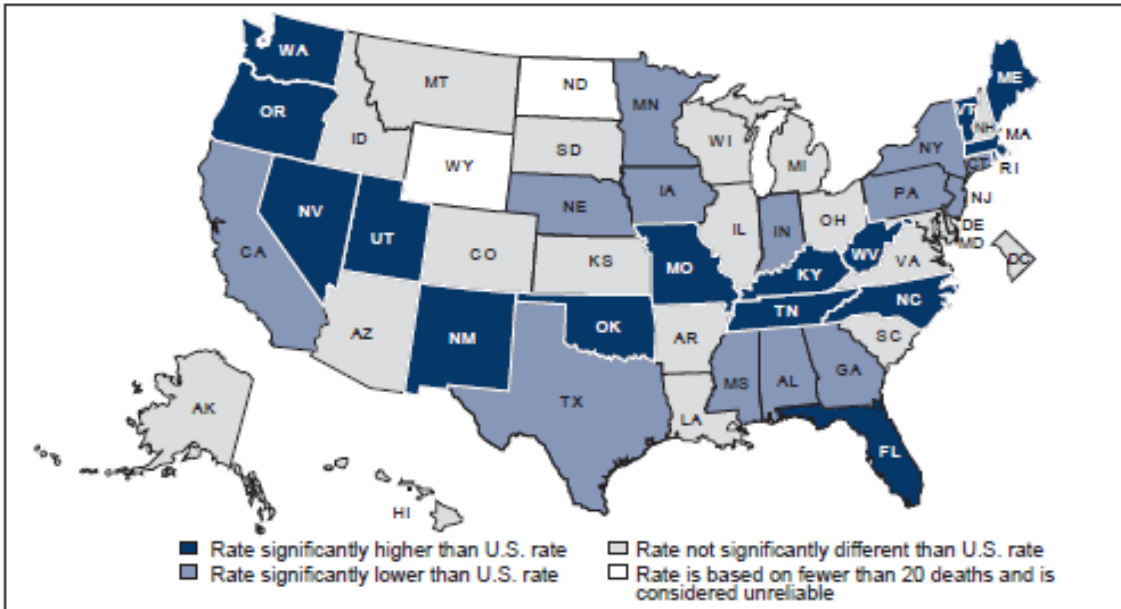
The dramatic number of deaths related to opioid painkillers is directly related to the increase in the non-medical use of prescription drugs. As USA Today points out in a recent article, Leonard Paulozzi of CDC “notes that the rise in fatal overdoses almost exactly parallels a corresponding rise in prescription painkiller scales. In surveys, about 5% of Americans say they have used a prescription narcotic in the past month.”²

Nationally, the death rate for opioid painkiller overdoses increased through 2006 for every age group for both males and females and is 4.6 deaths per 100,000. However, the death rates varied

more than eightfold among states (Figure 2). Sixteen states had significantly higher rates than the national average.

Figure 2.

Figure 5. Age-adjusted death rates for poisonings involving opioid analgesics: Comparison of state and U.S. rates: United States, 2006



NOTE: Access data table for Figure 5 at http://ftp.cdc.gov/pub/Health_Statistics/NCHS/Publications/Data_Briefs/db022fig05.xls.
SOURCE: CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System.

The non-medical use of prescription drugs, particularly opioid painkillers, is astounding and must be addressed. Improved regulation of these drugs by physicians is necessary, as are improved policies surrounding these drugs. The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) has a long-standing priority program to developing abuse-resistant formulations of prescribed controlled substances.

IBH also encourages better education for the general public, patients, and physicians about the importance of using these medications only for problems for which they are prescribed and only in the doses and by the routes of administration prescribed by their physicians. Further, patients receiving prescription controlled substances are responsible to ensure that no one else uses their medicines. Use by anyone other than the person for whom they were prescribed is illegal, unhealthy and dangerous, as seen by the astonishingly high number of overdose deaths related to their use.

For more information about IBH visit www.ibhinc.org.

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References

¹ Warner M, Chen LH, Makuc DM. Increase in fatal poisonings involving opioid analgesics in the United States, 1999–2006. NCHS data brief, no 22. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2009.

² Szabo, L. (2009, Oct. 2). Prescriptions now biggest cause of fatal drug overdoses. USA Today. Retrieved October 6, 2009 from http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-09-30-drug-overdose_N.htm