

## AMERICA IN PERIL

### Attacking the Heroin and Opioid Addiction Crisis America: Enforcement, Prevention and Education

By Christopher B. Smithers

Dr. Toby Cosgrove, CEO of The Cleveland Clinic and member of President Trump's Strategic and Policy Forum, vividly described a country on the brink of disaster when he noted in a television interview that during the entire Vietnam War America lost 53,000 people. "Last year," he went on to say "52,000 people died of opioid abuse."

"A Vietnam War is taking place in our country every year," he said.

I could not agree more. This is a war that knows no geographic or demographic boundaries. From desperate inner cities through, wealthy urban enclaves, middle-class suburbs, and out to our poorest rural areas regardless of age, race, education, marital status, political leanings or even athletic ability, any way you measure it we are under attack from cheap heroin and easily obtainable opioids.

We have come to a point where the New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio has authorized newspaper advertisement telling people to purchase and carry doses of Naloxone to administer in case they come across someone who has overdosed, as if it is such a common event that you might see your next door neighbor passed out on his lawn. It would be satire if it was not so frightening.

First responders throughout the country have been carrying Naloxone for some time now and law enforcement has shown determination and innovation for their part. The NYPD recently started an "Opioid Squad" to join its cadre of specialized squads like homicide and arson units. In 2016 there were four times as many heroin overdoses as murders in New York City.

However, we agree with the experts that law enforcement's efforts alone are not the answer.

We support the use of targeted advertising. The national anti-smoking television ads proved very effective in the ongoing struggle to reduce smoking among teenagers. Those ads are effective because they show the horrible effects of a lifetime of smoking. They picture people struggling to breathe, they tell stories of youngsters who lose their parents to smoking, they show real life examples of people scarred and deformed by the effects of a lifetime of addiction to nicotine.

We need television ads like those aimed at drug abuse. We need to demonstrate to our youth the horrors that await them if they continue on a path that often starts with alcohol abuse, to experimenting with drugs they find in their parent's medicine chests or are over prescribed to them by a doctor. The irresponsible use of these powerful drugs, some are used to put elephants to sleep, can lead to brain damage, physical disability and death.

These advertisements must be crafted in a way so the

message is one of deterrence rather than stigmatizing those suffering the illness of heroin and opioid addiction. They must also be constructed to specifically target young people.

The "Journal of Health Communication" in 2002 reported that, the most successful anti-smoking campaigns were those that specifically targeted youth with their message rather than the broader audience. In advertising the "one size fits all" approach is widely recognized as unsuitable.

The medical profession, the treatment community and law enforcement knows all this. The challenge is to get our young people to understand it. Advertisements on all media platforms; television, social networks and newspapers is a way to go that has not been fully exploited. We support any of these efforts.

At the same time we must continue our research into addiction. Learning how it works will lead us to more ways to controlling it. The Smithers Foundation has had great success in the field of alcohol abuse education, research and treatment and we are here to lend our support to similar work in the battle of the opioid epidemic.

Parents, clergy, teachers and school guest instructors all play a significant role in educating young people about the devastating effect heroin and opioid use and addiction will have on their lives. This must continue but more must be done.

Schools at all levels should include in their curriculum a structured course of study that teaches the dangers of experimentation with drugs and how it can lead to a life of addiction. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) firmly supports the idea of schools developing a required course focusing on the multi-faceted and dangerous world of drugs and drug use.

A growing number of colleges and universities around the country now offer at freshman orientation, sessions on the risks of binge drinking. These sessions should be expanded to include the dangers of drug abuse. Studies show that alcohol abuse by young people leads them in search of the greater high. Given the availability of prescription drugs and the relative inexpensive cost of heroin, that greater high is not hard to find.

America is in the throes of an epidemic. Heroin and opioid abuse is destroying individuals, destroying families and destroying communities across our great country. We have an obligation to see to it that those addicted are treated, those who traffic arrested and prosecuted AND those who have never touched a pill or never used a heroin in any form get the message that those drugs will kill you.

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