

EDWARD J. MARKEY
MASSACHUSETTS

COMMITTEES:

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
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U.S. SENATE CLIMATE CHANGE CLEARING HOUSE

United States Senate

October 14, 2014

SUITE SR-218
RUSSELL BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2107
202-224-2742

975 JFK FEDERAL BUILDING
15 NEW SUDBURY STREET
BOSTON, MA 02203
617-565-8519

222 MILLIKEN BOULEVARD, SUITE 312
FALL RIVER, MA 02721
508-677-0523

1550 MAIN STREET, 4TH FLOOR
SPRINGFIELD, MA 01101
413-785-4610

Rear Admiral Boris Lushniak
Acting United States Surgeon General
Tower Building Plaza Level 1, Room 100
1101 Wootton Parkway
Rockville MD 20852

Dear Dr. Lushniak:

In the past decade, prescription drug abuse has increased dramatically as have the harms resulting from drug abuse—including destruction of families and communities, burdens of increased theft and incarceration, and rise in overdose deaths. Today, death from drug overdose is the leading cause of injury death in the United States, with more than 100 people dying every day and another 6,700 treated in emergency rooms. Of the deaths related to pharmaceutical overdose, the vast majority involve opioid pain relievers, such as oxycodone. The treatment and prevention of prescription drug abuse are one of the most important and difficult public health challenges facing our country. As the nation's top public health official, I urge you to prepare a Surgeon General Report and Call to Action on prescription drug abuse, with a special emphasis on opioid painkillers, to spur national efforts to deal with this public health crisis.

Prescription drug abuse is the nation's fastest-growing drug problem. In 2011, about 1.4 million emergency room visits involved the nonmedical use of pharmaceuticals, including nearly half related to anti-anxiety and insomnia medications, followed only by prescription opioid painkillers. These pharmaceuticals have psychoactive properties and as a result are frequently misused or abused—that is, taken for reasons or in ways or amounts not intended by a doctor, or taken by someone other than the person for whom they are prescribed. In fact, prescription and over-the-counter drugs are, after alcohol and marijuana, the most commonly abused substances by Americans 14 and older. The classes of prescription drugs most commonly abused are: opioid pain relievers, such as Vicodin or Oxycontin; stimulants for treating Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), such as Adderall, Concerta, or Ritalin; and central nervous system (CNS) depressants for relieving anxiety, such as Valium or Xanax.

Although great strides have been made in raising general awareness of the dangers of illegal drugs, there remains a misconception that the misuse or abuse of prescription drugs is safer than improper use of other substances because they are approved and distributed legally through the health care system. This misconception may lead youth, in particular, to believe it is safe to use prescription painkillers recreationally. The nuanced message that these drugs are safe and effective when used properly, but also harmful and addictive can be difficult to effectively convey.

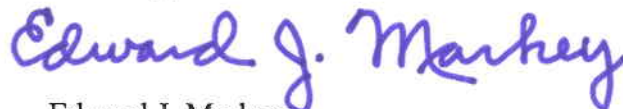
The abuse of prescription opioid painkillers is particularly troubling because of the link to illicit heroin use. From a pharmacological perspective, there are few differences between prescription opioid pain relievers and heroin. One of the similar properties of opioid drugs is their tendency, when used over long periods of time, to increase tolerance, necessitating a higher dose to achieve the same effect and breeding dependency. The need to overcome this tolerance, combined with the much cheaper street value of heroin, may drive a shift from prescription drug dependency to heroin abuse. In fact, data have shown that four out of five heroin users started abusing prescription drugs first. According to data recently released from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), deaths from overdoses have nearly quadrupled between 1999 and 2011 and deaths from heroin, typically fueled by prescription opioids, doubled in just the last two years.

In 2012 alone, health care providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid painkillers, enough for every American adult to have a bottle of pills. Although the U.S. comprises less than five percent of the world's population, Americans consume 80 percent of the global opioid painkillers and 99 percent of the global supply of hydrocodone, the active ingredient in Vicodin. In fact, Vicodin and other drugs containing the narcotic hydrocodone are now the most commonly prescribed medications in the U.S. While the prevailing approach used to be that opioid painkillers were not addictive if they were legitimately used to treat pain, it is now estimated that five to twenty-five percent of people who use prescription pain pills over the long-term become addicted to these medications. As such, special consideration should be given when this class of painkillers is prescribed, and doctors should be prepared and trained to spot signs of addiction and intervene early.

A Surgeon General's Report on the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs, with an emphasis on the most widely abused class of opioids, would evaluate the science on this issue, including the trends and epidemiological data, consider prescribing practices and standards of care, assess the health damaging effects and impacts on our healthcare system, present all the facts and alert health professionals, health officials, and consumers to the serious threat these drugs can cause when abused or misused. The report would pave the way for policy measures at all levels of government to reduce the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs and for widespread actions by healthcare providers to curb the ongoing epidemic of overdose deaths. Similar to how the 1964 *Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health* focused national attention on the harms of tobacco use during the height of its use, Americans need a similar wake-up call with regard to the impact of prescription drug abuse on the health, economy, and national security of our country.

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey

cc:

The Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell
Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201