

ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Prescription Drug Diversion: Combating the Scourge”
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
March 1, 2012

Thank you, Madam Chair, for holding this morning’s hearing. I appreciate your leadership on this serious issue.

The most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimates that over 20 million Americans aged 12 or older are current, or past-month, illicit drug users. That means nearly 10% of the teen and adult population has recently used street drugs or prescription drugs nonmedically.

Deaths attributable to drugs have increased more than fivefold since 1990. This tragic surge in drug-related deaths has been driven by an increase in the nonmedical use of prescription drugs, especially opioid pain relievers.

Unlike street drugs, these pain relievers have legitimate medical uses. Our challenge in today’s hearing is to understand the supply chain of these legal drugs and how they get into the hands of those who use them nonmedically.

Law enforcement has an important role to play in fighting this epidemic.

Several states have taken action to crack down on diversion while maintaining access to prescription drugs for legitimate uses. For many, this effort involves the tighter regulation of pain clinics, enhanced coordination with DEA, and the establishment of a prescription drug monitoring database.

There are advocates and legislators in state capitals across the country working hard to improve anti-diversion policies. In most cases, new laws resulted from a bipartisan, bicameral process that we should emulate here in Congress. Securing the supply of controlled pharmaceuticals is something we can all support.

Several facts about this epidemic are well-established.

Among those who abuse prescription drugs, a large majority originally obtain the drugs from a friend or family member. Doctors must discuss these issues with their patients to help prevent the sharing of prescriptions.

Individuals who abuse prescription pain relievers do so for a variety of reasons, but are very likely to use them together with alcohol, prescription tranquilizers, or illicit drugs, increasing chances of harm or death.

Doctors must understand how to spot those who are at risk and follow up to ensure their patients are using and responding to these potent medications properly.

The rates of abuse and overdose are currently highest in Florida and the central Appalachian region. But this is a national problem with wide-ranging effects on every state in the country. We do not want pill mills to be shut down in one state only to reappear a few miles away, across the border, in another state. If we see the rate of abuse go down in one state but rise in another, we have failed. We need to see the total national numbers go down.

Similarly, we do not want to control prescription opioid drug abuse only to have individuals shift to abusing a different drug. We need the total number of those abusing illicit drugs to fall.

Health officials and law enforcement, as well as states and the federal government, must work closely together to ensure that our nation's fight against prescription drug diversion is part of a broad strategy to minimize all forms of drug abuse and addiction in all parts of the United States.

I appreciate the opportunity to make a statement.

Thank you.