Health & Medicine

Painkiller Abuse Now a Global Scourge

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The epidemic of prescription-drug abuse that has ravaged the US over the past two decades is fast becoming a global problem, according to a new paper by Silvia Martins, an epidemiologist at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, and Lilian Ghandour, an epidemiologist at the American University of Beirut. Martins and Ghandour recently examined the results of more than a dozen surveys that have looked at recreational drug use among teenagers and young adults in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. They found that youths in many high- and middle-income countries are now abusing opioid-based painkillers at rates that rival those seen in the US, where nearly 8 percent of high-school seniors admit to having abused the drugs.

"This is alarming, since opioids are so addictive," says Martins, whose paper appears in the journal *World Psychiatry*. "These painkillers also pose a substantial risk of fatal overdose — especially when combined with alcohol or other drugs."

The misuse of prescription painkillers, such as Vicodin, Oxycontin, and Percocet, has been a serious problem in the US since the 1990s. Physicians, initially underestimating the addictiveness of the drugs, prescribed them to millions of people for long-term relief from back pain and other common ailments. Many patients have since become addicted to opioids, with some even turning to illicit narcotics like heroin or opium when their prescriptions expire. Even more disastrous from a public-health perspective, experts say, is that prescription painkillers are finding their way into the hands of teenagers and young adults.

"The recreational use of these drugs by young people is the main driving force behind opioid addiction in the United States," says Martins. "Young people have ample opportunity to pilfer them from medicine cabinets of parents, relatives, or friends."

Now that American doctors are prescribing painkillers more cautiously, US drug makers have started marketing them more aggressively overseas. Martins speculates that this is why young people in other countries have gained easier access to them.

"What's needed now is for health officials around the world to educate their physicians about the risks posed by these drugs, so that they don't make the same mistake American doctors did and overprescribe them," Martins says. "Ordinary people must also must be educated. They need to understand that prescription painkillers must never be used without medical supervision."

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