



THREE DIVERGENT PATHS FOR DEALING WITH OPIOID ABUSE... BUT EMPLOYERS MUST CHOOSE ONE

In the U.S., the opioid crisis is devastating. Currently, 116 people die every day from opioid abuse. It recently surpassed car accidents as a leading cause of death among young people. And, more Millennials are coming into the workplace either fighting an opioid addiction or familiar with opioid experimentation than any previous generation. This crisis is not going away any time soon due to the addictive and destructive nature of the drug as well as policies within the medical community that have firmly ensconced the drug as the treatment option of choice. Though the medical community and politicians are attempting to create change, the same causes that made opioids so pervasive will keep many Americans tethered to it.



Which path do I take to deal with opioids at my workplace?

So, how does this impact employers? It has left employers, even small business owners, with a decision to make. Which path do I take to deal with opioids at my workplace? Because, according to statistics, the opioids are already there.

The drug addiction propelled by “The Fifth Sign” and a single letter to the editor

For decades, physicians had feared to use pain medication, especially opioids, because of the high addiction rates. This is no surprise to anyone who has studied history, such as the Opium Wars in China; or to a student of current events who has witnessed the devastation in Afghanistan and the Middle East due to opium production and use in the 21st century.

However, the increasing pressure from the American Pain Society and consumers was forcing a re-evaluation of standard medical treatment. According to an article published by Science Direct, “the American Pain Society (APS) initiated an influential campaign, “Pain, The Fifth Vital Sign,” to raise awareness among health professionals of pain assessment and management. Although opioids were described as just one possible treatment option, the initiative did advocate a change in philosophy around use of opioids for chronic pain. Opioids were promoted to improve quality at end of life. The Veteran’s Health Administration (VHA), the largest government run health-care

system in the U.S., adopted pain as the 5th vital sign initiative in 1999–giving strong credibility to the campaign (Mularski et al., 2006).” Prior to the 5th sign, a pain scale was not even a part of triage. Now, you can’t go to the emergency room without ranking the pain you’re experiencing, and medical providers will also ask you this as part of your recovery process and after a major medical procedure.

Most physicians were still hesitant to prescribe patients a highly addictive drug. But then, the rediscovery and mass acceptance of a single letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1980 assuaged physicians’ fears. This letter was cited in hundreds of other articles, pharmaceutical publications, and its findings were circulated as gospel. The letter’s headline? “Addiction rare in patients treated with narcotics.”

“Purdue Pharma, which makes OxyContin, starting using the letter’s data to say that less than one percent of patients treated with opioids became addicted. Pain specialists routinely cited it in their lectures. Porter and Jick’s letter is not the only study whose findings on opioid addiction became taken out of context, but it was one of the most prominent. Jick recently told the AP, ‘I’m essentially mortified that that letter to the editor was used as an excuse to do what these drug companies did.’”

The letter was only five sentences long, and it was a study of an extremely controlled group of patients for a very limited time

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frame. The study was not peer reviewed because it was published as a letter, and the findings were not meant to be conclusive, more of a point of interest from one physician to his community of peers.

Now, the myth that it was possible to take opioids without addiction was in circulation, and, according to pharmaceuticals, supported by the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Now, the drugs were available to physicians (developed in the 1990s), addiction had been downplayed, and leaders in the medical community were supporting prescription of opioids.

“Even my fellowship director was so bold as to say, ‘Pain soaks up the euphoria, and therefore you can’t become addicted to opioids,” said Nathaniel Katz, M.D. in an interview with CNN.

Recent research shows that the medical community was, in many cases, motivated by outsized “thought leadership” profits to

endorse opioids. According to research published by CNN, thousands of physicians were paid more than \$25,000 by opioid manufacturers in 2014 and 2015.

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The fallout in the lives of the American people

Transition to today, two decades after opioids swept through the U.S. Someone dies every 19 minutes from an accidental drug overdose. In 2012, enough opioids were prescribed for every American man, woman, and child to have a bottle in their possession. The opioid epidemic is impacting every American, and every community. Those most likely to become addicted to opioids are those in the poorest and most rural communities—areas already hit hard by poor health and poverty.

SOME STATISTICS ON OPIOID ABUSE

Opioid overdoses
increased 30%

from July 2016 through September
2017 in 52 areas in 45 states.



The Midwestern region saw opioid
overdoses increase

70%

from July 2016 through September 2017.

The CDC estimates the total **economic burden**
of prescription opioid misuse in the US is

\$78.5B a year,

including the costs of health care, lost productivity, addiction
treatment, and criminal justice involvement.



Opioid overdoses in large cities increase by

54% in 16 states.

Drug overdoses claimed
the lives of nearly

64K
Americans in 2016.



**Nearly two-thirds of
these deaths (66%)**

involved a prescription
or illicit opioid.

Some employers are choosing to remain completely ignorant of the drug habits and criminal records of all their employees. However, this is a dangerous option for all involved.

The employer's role: How to deal with opioids in the workplace

As an employer, you must choose how to deal with this crisis in your individual workplace. Your three options are ignorance, informed employment and zero-tolerance. Depending on your industry and your location, all these options may not be available to you. However, you must make a choice on how to deal with opioids and other drugs in the workplace.

Option 1: Ignorance (it is not bliss)

This is not an option for every employer, especially those under DOT regulation. In other industries, this is the standard choice. Some employers are choosing to remain completely ignorant of the drug habits and criminal records of all their employees. However, this is a dangerous option for all involved. We've all heard the horror stories—the police come in and tell you a former employee was a cold-blooded murderer, or an employee steals thousands to support their drug habit—from you and all his former employers. But, how can you hire in an industry where drug use is rampant? Or, alternatively, how can you support the re-entry into society of former criminals who need a second chance and still protect your business? There is a way, and ignorance is not your only option.

The cost of ignorance is high in the current legislative environment as well. If you were to fire an employee because he or she

was underperforming at work and drug use was clear, but your company had no testing protocol or documentation in place, that decision could cost you thousands. Many cases in which an employer was uninformed and either fired or reprimanded an employee for poor performance that turned out to be alcohol or drug-related have become [discrimination or wrongful firing lawsuits](#). Texas is a right-to-work state, but the consequences of a drug-related incident are still very real for many employers. Informed employment allows you to protect your bottom line while hiring who you choose.



Option 2: Informed Employment

There is a space between ignorance and zero-tolerance, and it is informed employment. An informed employer may choose to hire those with a criminal record, a history of drug use, or a prescription for opioids with a clear understanding, as well as a testing protocol, that allows the business to support these employees on their path to recovery while maintaining a safe workplace.

Your employees
are your business'
greatest asset—it
is worth it to know
their choices and
make informed
decisions about
their future.

How is this possible? If you have tests and a policy in place from the pre-employment screen to randoms, you will be aware of you employee's habits before hiring and create an ongoing dialog throughout their employment. [SHRM pointed to rolling background checks and drug tests as one of the leading HR trends in 2019.](#) Prescription drug policies are another way of remaining informed without infringing on your employees' choice of pain management. Quality drug testing companies are prepared to partner with you and craft a plan that enables both informed decision making and employee freedom.

The advantage of informed employment becomes truly evident when an employee has tested positive in a random drug screen. At this point with a policy of informed employment, you have a choice. You can either fire the employee or choose to help him or her to receive the treatment necessary while holding the position. If you choose to keep the employee on your staff, treatment is regulated and will be conducted through your drug testing or occupational health provider. You are then able to give a star employee a chance at a better life while keeping him or her on your team. It is a win all around, and only possible with informed employment. Had you chosen ignorance, you could have lost your employee to a checkered record of missed days and performance, or to an overdose and death. Your employees are your business'

greatest asset—it is worth it to know their choices and make informed decisions about their future.

Option 3: Zero-Tolerance

Some employers, such as those who work in public safety, operate heavy equipment, offer driving services and/or fall under one of the six DOT modes, have no choice but to implement zero-tolerance policies for opioid abuse. While they can move employees who have failed a drug test out of a safety sensitive position and re-hire them once they have completed the SAAP process, they cannot allow the employee to stay in their job. For these businesses, everything from the tests they use for their employees to the frequency of the tests may be regulated. In DOT businesses, you must partner with a drug testing company that is reputable and has the DOT stamp of approval.

However, other employers who do not work in regulated industries are also choosing a zero-tolerance policy. When the opioid abuse crisis is compounded by the recent marijuana legislation and policies, some employers want to know their employees are drug-free when they come to work. And, for employers in every state, even those that have legalized marijuana, a zero-tolerance workplace is an option.

Is it possible to design a zero-tolerance policy that ensures your employees are not under the influence while at the office but also gives you, the employer,

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the flexibility to hire. In an era of record-low unemployment and triple the number of positives on drug tests, employers must have a plan that uses the tests most necessary at the right time. It is no longer as simple as collecting samples once a quarter. Drug testing companies are now employing sophisticated strategies to lower employer's costs while finding the most relevant information through a combination of testing methods including randoms, instant, post-accident and pre-employment testing. With a solid plan in place for drug testing, it is possible to have a drug-free workplace in any industry.

Employers must choose: ignorance, zero tolerance or informed employment.

Due to the widespread nature of opioid abuse in the U.S., and the prevalence of drug use and experimentation in younger workers, economists and the medical community are predicting that the battle with opioids will be long and arduous. Which will you choose to propel your business in 2019?

WORKPLACE SAFETY SCREENINGS

Workplace Safety Screening is a partner for Houston businesses in increasing safety and productivity, reducing liability through employment screening, including background checks, drug testing, and occupational health management. Check us out at WorkplaceSafetyScreenings.com, or follow us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

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