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Busting Addiction and Its Myths Episode 2 Season 3

100 Times More Deadly Than Heroin?

Today I would like to talk more about the most dangerous drug on the planet, so let's call this episode #2 of season 3: "100 Times More Deadly Than Heroin?"

This is being recorded as China is grabbing much of the attention during the covid-19 pandemic, but there is another scourge that is also deadly, and its source is also China, and that is a substance that is also killing people at a rapid pace, and that substance is fentanyl.

I bring this to you so that you know what may be going on in your own neighbourhood, whether it's wealthy or poor or some place in between, which is where 60% of American families live.

The fact is that if you have an addict in your family, you may not even know what she is using, and whether your addict is at home or on the street, she may be using fentanyl, sometimes without knowing it.

The venerable New York Times reported in December, republished April 4th as part of their "Promises Made" series, that China was finally, finally cracking down on the easy export of fentanyl from China and its easy import into the United States. How important is that?

Fentanyl sourced from China accounted for 97% of the drug's seizure by US law enforcement in the last two years, whether at the border or elsewhere, according to the DEA, the Drug Enforcement Administration.

That's also important for two more reasons: fentanyl is 100 times more powerful per gram than heroin, so the chances of an overdose are much more likely since it takes just being off by a tiny amount to kill, and its consumption is exploding and growing exponentially.

The market for it in the US appears insatiable. In 2019 American customs agents seized 1,154 kilograms, or 2,545 pounds of fentanyl ...the equivalent of over 200,000 pounds of heroin. That compares to 31 kilos or 68 pounds of fentanyl seized just 4 years earlier.

The appeal of fentanyl for the producer is easy to understand: raw materials are cheap, it's easy to synthesize in a lab, and it's way more addictive than heroin, which means a greater opportunity to create loyal customers...until they drop dead of an overdose.

Go to your local police station and ask the detectives in charge of drug arrests which substance is most prevalent and I bet you will get one of three answers: meth, aka speed or ice...all the same, or heroin, or fentanyl. Then ask them or a local ER which substance accounts for the most overdoses, and it'll almost always be fentanyl. Perhaps this exercise will be good for you, for it will open your eyes as to what is happening in your own community, right under your nose, or even in your own home without your knowledge or suspicion.

It stands to reason why fentanyl is so compelling to the user: a fraction of the bulk, or weight, and a huge punch for less money.

For the maker, in addition to what I just mentioned, it's hugely profitable because of its obvious addictive qualities; the maker can send a package that's less detectable more cheaply. Besides, for the Chinese makers, they now replace other types of opioids whose sources are Afghanistan, Laos or Colombia.

So this is what RAND Corporation said about the newly established Chinese laws cracking down on the export of fentanyl: "The scale of China's under-regulated industries allows for minimally-trained technicians with access to the proper inputs to follow simple synthesis steps while still avoiding oversight". They go on to say: "China's pharmaceutical and industrial chemical industries are large and beyond the reach of US law enforcement".

What that means to Main Street USA is that it is way too early to let up on vigilance against fentanyl and its derivatives. It's like this: Chinese labs are constantly producing chemical variants that sidestep existing legal restrictions. Manufacturers simply adjust the chemical structure slightly and create a new analogue of the drug, not yet banned.

Until the recent crackdown by China, it was incredibly easy to get fentanyl into the United States. Sometimes you would just send a WhatsApp message referred by

another so-called customer aka a dealer and ask how much for the merchandise and you would be quoted a price, pay for it with your credit card or Pay Pal, then you get your purchase via China Post and the US Postal Service. Remember, it doesn't take much weight to make a ton of doses or baggies where it's added to heroin or cocaine, with and without the addict's knowledge, or sold straight up as fentanyl.

When it comes to Naloxone, or Narcan, which is used to pull addicts back from the brink of a potentially deadly overdose of an opiate like heroin, it is much harder for EMT's to judge how much Narcan to inject, simply because they may not know whether the addict is OD'ing from fentanyl or from heroin, maybe both. The risk is then if the addict is OD'ing on fentanyl, the addict may be given too little to make the difference so the EMT will have to see at what Narcan dose the addict starts to come around, since the effect of Naloxone is so quick.

It's a lucky thing that Narcan is effective against both heroin and fentanyl, because they are often mixed.

It comes as a surprise to some people that opioid use - and abuse - is far higher in the US than it is anywhere else in the world. What's the reason for that?

It can't be because US laws against abuse are lax. The US has some of the harshest penalties in the world for possession and sale of illegal drugs.

One theory, and this one makes sense to me, is as follows. It turns out that fentanyl is been in common use as a painkiller far more effective than morphine in post-surgical situations. The prescribed amounts are in micro-gram amounts...that's a thousandth of a gram. So, the US pharma companies have been synthesizing it and making big profits from it for quite a while.

It also turns out that a lot of people who would not have otherwise become addicted to prescription opioids like Vicodin, Oxycontin, Hydrocodone and the like, started to use them post-surgery and wouldn't or couldn't stop, and therefore either stole them, went doctor shopping, or forged prescriptions, or bought them on the street, or all of the above.

In the meantime, the doctors became pushers for the drug companies who had a multi-billion-dollar vested interest in the opioid business. You may be aware of one company who went under as a consequence of losing a class-action lawsuit that showed them to be responsible for understating the addictive qualities of their brand name opioid even when their own data showed it be extremely addictive. And the family who owned the company shovelled billions of profit dollars into their personal accounts, out of reach of the law...or so they thought.

What does this have to do with fentanyl? Those who had become addicted to prescription pain killer opioids discovered that heroin was cheaper and fentanyl cheaper still than street-level prescription opioids, so why not? Then, let's look at the fentanyl market from another angle. Those who had been heroin addicts for years discovered a cheaper and better high, so why not pure fentanyl?

Even if China cuts off the supply of fentanyl and its variants, and even if the DEA and US Border Patrol and the US Postal Service inspectors manage to intercept a high percentage of the drug coming in from China, the problem is not supply – the problem is demand.

And remember that fentanyl is easy and cheap to make, and packs big profit and punch in a tiny package. You can count on the Mexican cartels and US makers getting busy replacing China as the supplier. The scary part is US homemade fentanyl, just like the speed labs that have taken over the rural landscape where the drugs of desperation rule the day.

What can you do? You can support the use of Naloxone by your local law enforcement and EMT's. Check your local situation and also see if they have a sufficient quantity on hand, so please support an investment in the substance that can save a life right in your hometown.

You can help advocate for non-opioid methods of managing pain, and perhaps save another person from becoming addicted.

If you hear that having Naloxone available simply encourages addicts to be even more irresponsible from people who see addiction as a crime or as a moral failing, tell them there is no evidence to support that.

Further, support one of my favourite organizations, www.shatterproof.com which advocates for sensible laws supporting recovery, prevention programs, and education about addiction. And if you need personal support as a result of an addiction or alcohol in your home, then consider joining Al Anon. You can find meetings online in your hometown.

What have we learned today?

1. It is entirely possible that your loved one addict might be using fentanyl which is rapidly replacing heroin as a drug of choice.
2. Fentanyl is incredibly appealing to the maker and to the user, as it packs a huge punch for a small amount. Hugely profitable for the makers and cheap for the user.
3. The opioid crisis was fuelled by greed and dishonesty by certain pharmaceutical companies who pushed them to doctors as a safe and effective pain killer.
4. The popularity of fentanyl was a natural extension of the opioid addiction crisis, offering a cheap alternative, not only for prescription drug abusers, but also for traditional heroin addicts.
5. Families of addicts can take action to support the use of Naloxone, support addiction organizations such as Shatterproof, and seek help themselves from Al Anon to attain some peace in the midst of the battle.

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