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Retired DEA Agent Warns that Despite COVID, Opioid Crisis isn't Over

 With all the talk of COVID-19 in the news, the focus on other healthcare crises, such as the opioid epidemic, has slipped from the headlines. Yet the numbers of those addicted or dying from these drugs continue to rise—and the numbers are shocking.

“When I retired from the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) in the early 1990s, there were roughly 9,000 overdose deaths a year,” said Bob Stutman, one of the nation’s top experts on drugs and founder of The Stutman Group. “Last year, there were

approximately 70,000 deaths. We'll have to see what happens this year, but my guess is that there will be a spike."

Stutman, who spent 25 years with the DEA, including as its head of international operations and the head of its New York office, now travels the country speaking to physicians, healthcare workers and families about the continuing opioid epidemic. He worries that with all of the focus on the coronavirus, no one is paying attention to the fact that people are still dying from the use of street and prescription drugs.

"In no way am I denigrating the COVID crisis—we may see up to 200,000 people this year die from the disease," he said. "Hopefully, we'll have a vaccine for it in a year or 18 months. But current studies show that even if things go well over the next decade, we'll lose about 700,000 Americans to drug overdoses, and we will never have a vaccine for that.

"I understand and support all of this attention being paid to the coronavirus, but it's horrible that we're completely forgetting about the opioid epidemic in the meantime," he continued. "We'll look back in five years, and think, 'How did we do that?'"

One of Stutman's worries is that the virus and opioids tend to play off of each other. "Obviously, when you abuse opioids, it affects your breathing system, which is one of the biggest dangers with COVID," he explained. "We're also all trying to isolate ourselves because of the virus, and we should—but when you're by yourself, you're not attending group therapy or a 12-step group, which creates a really bad situation."

According to Stutman, this uniquely American problem started within the last two decades, when doctors went from writing about 8,000 to 10,000 opioid prescriptions in the '90s to writing more than 260,000 in 2015.

"No other country in the world does anything like this," he said. "If you break your arm in Europe, they give you Tylenol. In America, they give you Vicodin. That's the difference.

"I don't blame doctors for this—they've been put in a no-win position," he added. "Big Pharma lied to doctors about potential addiction problems, and in the end at least one company had to plead guilty in federal court for lying and fraud and had to pay an \$8 million fine. Pharmaceutical ads, which are illegal in every country except the United States and New Zealand, push Americans to take pills for everything, and people expect their doctors to provide them. Doctors are pushed into a corner."

In addition to prescribing fewer opioids and reining in Big Pharma and its ads, Stutman surprisingly supports another avenue for helping curb the addiction problem.

"Under very certain circumstances, I support the use of medical marijuana as an option instead of opioids," he said. "I was an anti-marijuana person my whole life until I started to read the science, and I go where the science takes me."

"Studies have been done on the potential use of cannabis as an option for opioids and I believe that the facts are strong enough to support a government-sponsored study to see if it will help," he continued, adding that studies have shown that states that have medical marijuana programs have a roughly 20 to 25 percent less rate of opioid addiction.

Stutman also supports replacing methadone with medical cannabis for those recovering from addiction, as well as offering it as an alternative to 12-step programs.

"You have to believe the science; there's a huge debate about whether it's better to treat addiction with medicines like Vivitrol®, Naloxone and methadone, or a 12-step method like Narcotics Anonymous," he said. "Some studies have shown that medical marijuana could be a better treatment for opioid disorders than 12-step programs and other medicines."

While his theories aren't accepted by everyone, Stutman says that action has to be taken now to gain control of the opioid crisis.

“I was feeling good before COVID, because after 15 years, people were finally paying attention to the problem,” he said. “Then boom! Along comes COVID and that’s the end of the opioid epidemic. But it’s not over.”

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