

National Rx Drug Abuse Summit

Press Release
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Prescription Drug Abuse Epidemic Can Be Solved Through Collaborative Efforts, officials say during opening of Summit

CHAMPIONSGATE, FL - Encouraging greater collaboration between agencies, creating seamless interstate data sharing networks, and providing better addiction education for health care professionals were common themes expressed during the first day of the second National Rx Drug Abuse Summit.

"We can stop this epidemic," proclaimed Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which elevated the country's focus on prescription drug abuse one year ago. "We have the tools, but we need everyone working together in an all-hands-on-deck approach."

Nearly 900 people representing 49 states and two other countries are gathered in Florida this week to address issues related to prescription drug abuse and to share information about programs that are making a difference.

"This is an urgent issue. We can't afford to wait and wait and wait," said Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). "Our slowness is costing the lives of individuals."

The overdose death rate from opioid drugs has skyrocketed in recent years and "parallels the four-fold increase in sales of these drugs over the past decade," Frieden noted.

More than 125,000 Americans have died from opioid-related overdoses in the past 10 years, Frieden said, adding the CDC is focused on providing better monitoring of prescription drugs by encouraging real-time reporting, supporting states' efforts to reduce abuse and diversion of prescription medications, and improving clinical practices.

"This isn't either-or. We all need to work together to strengthen partnerships, but there is no magic bullet," Frieden said. "Numbers can be numbing, but behind every one of them is a story."

"It is clear we have a lot of knowledge ... sufficient knowledge for education and intervention," Volkow said. "What we need is coordination to make this happen. The health care system needs to be a very close partner."

Reiterating a point she made at the inaugural Summit, Volkow pointed out that medical schools in the United States only provide about seven hours of instruction on treating pain - half that of Canada and only 10 percent of the training veterinary schools require for their students.

Availability of opioid medications "is probably one of the main factors" in our current crisis, Volkow said, noting from 1991 to 2011 the number of prescriptions has grown from 76 million to 219 million - a staggering number that can "be difficult to justify."

"We need to have education materials (for prescribers) that are completely void of conflicts of interest," Volkow said to enthusiastic applause.

Although the rate of people abusing prescription drugs actually decreased from 2010-2011, the number of overdose deaths continues to rise across the United States, said Gil Kerlikowske, director of the White House Office on National Drug Control Policy. "We have a tough problem. We have to work together."

One important tool is to encourage citizens to dispose of their unused or outdated medications through medication drop-boxes and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's pill take-back days, Kerlikowske said, noting the sixth take-back day is scheduled for Saturday, April 27.

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Dr. Margaret Hamburg, Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, said it was important to "never forget the human dimension" of our country's drug problems.

"Look beyond the grim statistics and you will find families whose lives have been shattered," said Hamburg, whose agency is tasked with protecting the public health. "We must strike a balance between potential risk and potential benefits ... to ensure safety and safe use of medications."

"We are listening hard to the many issues and concerns," Hamburg continued, noting her agency was in the process of evaluating whether to require abuse-deterrent formulations for generic OxyContin and whether to reclassify Hydrocodone to provide greater regulation of its use. "But, we're not ready to announce our findings."

"You can all feel the work you are doing ... is making an impact," Hamburg said. "It is partnerships that will turn the tide to a make a difference."

Operation UNITE (Unlawful Narcotics Investigations, Treatment and Education), created in 2003 by Congressman Harold "Hal" Rogers (KY-5th) in response to the prescription drug abuse epidemic within his district, was the first organization to employ a holistic, three-pronged approach to the problem.

"The work you do actually matters. It's time to win communities back and get our neighbors back on their feet," Rogers told Summit attendees. "Dr. Frieden called it what it is: an unprecedented epidemic that is stealing our families. This problem isn't going to go away just because we're not talking about it."

"The country is being led from Appalachia," said Dr. Robert DuPont, the first director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and second White House drug chief. "Out of UNITE has come a national movement. This (Summit) is a coming together that is going to make a huge difference."

"We wouldn't be fighting the fight we're engaged in if it wasn't for (Congressman Rogers)," Kerlikowske agreed. "Until a few years ago (prescription drug abuse) wasn't on the radar screen" for most outside the law enforcement and treatment fields. But, as drugs continue to place an "incredible burden" on society, more and more folks are becoming engaged in anti-drug efforts.

While police agencies must continue to take a tough stand against those who put profits over people, there are many other things officers can do in areas such as education and treatment that will have an impact, Kerlikowske added. "It's much more important that a life be saved than a prosecution occur."

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About the National Rx Drug Abuse Summit

The 2013 National Rx Drug Abuse Summit is the largest collaboration of professionals from local, state, and federal agencies; businesses; academia; clinicians; treatment providers; counselors, educators; state and national leaders; and advocates impacted by Rx drug abuse, misuse and diversion. The inaugural Summit in 2012 drew more than 700 participants from 45 states.

Media Coverage

Members of the media can receive a free event pass to cover the 2013 National Rx Drug Abuse Summit by registering their attendance. For details contact Communications Director Dale Morton at 606-677-6147 or dmorton@centertech.com.

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