

Prescription Drug Overdoses Create Burden

BY LISA GIRION
AND KAREN KAPLAN
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Prescription drug overdoses, a dangerous side effect of the nation's embrace of narcotic painkillers, are a "substantial" burden on hospitals and the economy, according to a new study of emergency room visits.

Overdoses involving prescription painkillers have become a leading cause of injury deaths in the U.S. and a closely watched barometer of an evolving health care crisis. Little was known, however, about the nature of overdoses treated in the nation's emergency rooms.

A new analysis of 2010 data from hospitals nationwide found that prescription painkillers, known as opioids, were involved in 68 percent of overdoses treated in emergency rooms. Hospital care for those overdose victims cost an estimated \$1.4 billion.

The estimated 92,200 hospital visits were more than five times the number of deaths involving opioid painkillers that year.

"What this study shows us is opioid overdose deaths are just the tip of an iceberg," said Andrew Kolodny, an addiction doctor who helped found Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing.

In a report published online Monday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association's JAMA Internal Medicine*, researchers from Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, Brown University and Rush Medical College analyzed data from the Nationwide Emergency Department Sample and adjusted the raw figures to

generate national estimates.

Researchers found that fewer than 2 percent of the overdoses treated in emergency rooms were fatal. But in more than half the cases, victims had to be admitted to the hospital.

"Further efforts to stem the prescription opioid overdose epidemic are urgently needed," the researchers concluded.

U.S. Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. made the same point in a speech to the nation's police chiefs Monday. He unveiled a Department of Justice "tool kit" to guide law enforcement agencies responding to drug overdose calls and encouraged police departments to provide officers with naloxone, a fast-acting antidote that can reverse overdoses and prevent death.

"It's absolutely critical that we equip them to respond appropriately," Holder said.

Opioid drugs — including forms of morphine, methadone, oxycodone and hydrocodone, such as OxyContin and Vicodin — are prescribed for patients who need powerful painkillers. But if patients take them for an extended period, they can develop a tolerance and require higher and higher doses of the drugs, making an overdose more likely. Patients who have too much of these drugs in their systems may lose consciousness and stop breathing.

Painkiller deaths quadrupled between 1999 and 2011, mirroring a sharp rise in the number of prescriptions for

such drugs. In 2009, overdoses involving painkillers pushed drug fatalities past traffic accidents as a cause of death. And in 2011, the U.S. Centers for Disease Con-

trolling program, known as CURES, before prescribing certain drugs. The Medical Board of California is preparing to adopt new guidelines for prescribing opioid

painkillers.

And Gov.

Jerry

Brown

recently

signed into

law a bill

that allows

people to

buy the

naloxone overdose antidote

injector pens and nasal

sprays without a prescription.

The new study tallies some of the costs of overdoses. Roughly 41 percent of the patients who went to a hospital after taking prescription opioids were treated in the emergency room and released; 55 percent were admitted to the hospital. And 4 percent were transferred to an acute care hospital.

Among those who became hospital inpatients, the average stay was 3.8 days, and their average charges came to \$29,497. For patients who were released without being admitted, the average charges were \$3,640. Altogether, the cost of treating both groups of patients was nearly \$1.4 billion in 2010.

The study found that patients who needed emergency

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MICHAEL YOKELL

trol and Prevention declared an epidemic.

The crisis had long been blamed on pharmacy robberies, teenage pill poppers and the "black market." But a 2012 Los Angeles Times study showed that physicians played an important role in prescription drug overdoses. *The Times* analysis of 3,733 fatalities found that drugs prescribed by physicians to patients caused or contributed to nearly half the deaths.

In response to the epidemic, almost every state has created a prescription drug monitoring program so physicians can log into a computer to check whether a patient is getting a dangerous narcotic from another physician.

Proposition 46 on the November ballot would require physicians to check California's prescription drug moni-

Letter to the Editor:

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Quick words of endorsement for Pat Garrity running for Yankton County Auditor:

I have known Pat Garrity and the Garrity family for over 30 years. Pat Garrity, like his father Joe, displays honest, dedicated and hard working ethics that can be counted on! I had the pleasure to visit with Pat last weekend following the SDSU Hobo day parade. As a previous County Auditor myself, (Brookings 1990-1998, then County Commissioner 1998-2002) Pat and I discussed the challenges facing Yankton County. We reviewed past years of audit findings. I can attest from our conversation, Pat has a grasp of the issues. Pat has done his research. Pat understands the County Auditor position has a huge responsibility to serve at the pleasure of the public, acting as the fiduciary arm of the tax dollars collectead. Tax dollars Yankton citizens work hard to pay - and need to properly be reported and accounted for. Pat has a proven work history in Yankton County. The citizens and taxpayers of Yankton County would be blessed to have Pat's hard work and dedication in this important office.

Sara Kneip, Brookings, SD

care for an overdose of prescription opioids were most likely to be from the South (40 percent); to be between the ages of 18 and 54 (66 percent); and to live in a ZIP Code where the median income was below \$67,000 (79 percent).

People with breathing, heart and mental health problems were at higher risk for drug overdoses, the study showed.

"That suggests that when a clinician writes a prescription for opioid painkillers for someone with one of these conditions, they need to do so with care," said Michael Yokell, a Stanford University medical student and one of the researchers.

"They need to think about alternatives," he said. "And if

they choose opioids, they need to have a conversation ... about the risk of overdose."

Emergency room physicians said the findings reflected their experiences.

Dr. Cesar Aristeiguieta, who runs an emergency room in Houston, said physicians prescribed more narcotic painkillers out of a desire to relieve their patients suffering and in response to pressure from medical boards and other health policymakers.

"Now we are seeing people can obtain narcotics easier than street drugs — and for free or low cost with insurance," Aristeiguieta said. "It's no wonder we're in the situation we're in."

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Excited and Encouraged by the Yankton County Commission Race

After reading the full page viewpoints in Friday's Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan on the Yankton county commission race and the current business climate in the county, we felt compelled to offer some viewpoints of our own. We live in a time of history where the American citizens by large numbers are disgruntled with a dysfunctional political system ran by less than qualified politicians from the national level right down to the local level. This has led to apathy, distrust and straight party voting. We need all ideas and opinions in the open and then sort through and pick the best and compromise for the good of all people.

With that said, the Yankton County commission race is very exciting to us in that we have a large field of contenders with a passion for the seats. They are diversified in their thinking and come from diversified backgrounds. This leads to positive outcomes and not endless negative rhetoric.

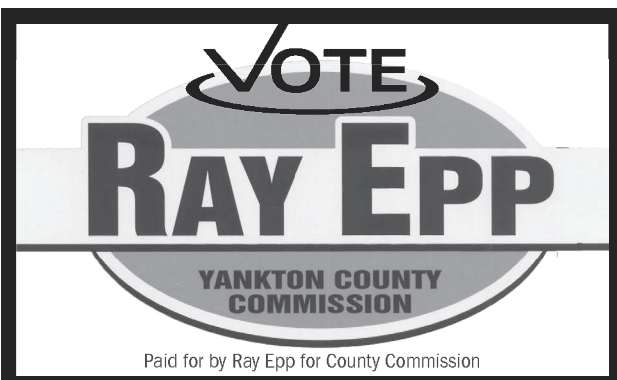
Another observation by us is that the list of supporters that came along with the full page in Friday's newspaper are nearly all people we know or have done business with in our community. And most interesting is that they are bankers, lawyers, farmers, doctors, agribusiness men and women, etc. and Independents, Democrats, and Republicans. How exciting to see this diversified group stand together for the passion that they have for the betterment of the Yankton community! We are excited to see real politics at work here as it should be.

Finally thanks to our forefathers who had the wisdom to set up a political system that allows us to voice our viewpoints as we have here. Never abandon the constitution.

We support those candidates listed in the aforementioned article. Bodenstedt, Epp, Kettering, and Woods.

Randy and Valerie Svendsen

Farmers and wage earners of Yankton County and residents of the city of Yankton.



Two-Thirds of Yankton's legislators voted against health care for 48,000 South Dakotans

✓ That Vote Costs South Dakota \$275 Million Per Year

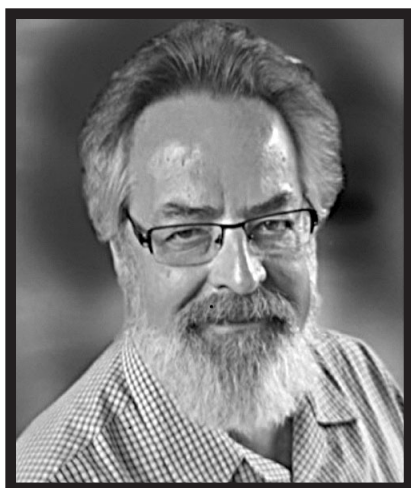
✓ That Vote Hurt Our Hospitals, Our Clinics and Our Working Families

✓ That Vote Cost 172 Lives (*New England Journal of Medicine*)

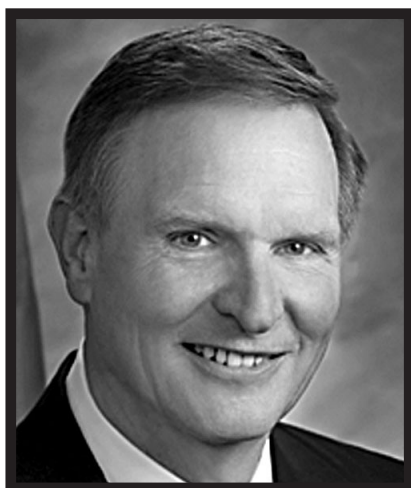
✓ That Vote Hurt Our Economy and Our People

✓ We Promise to put Yankton County's Families First—ALWAYS!

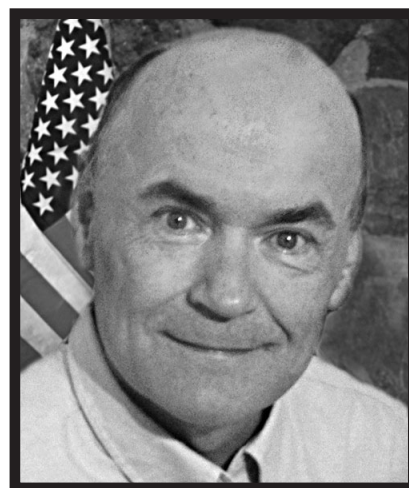
We will vote "YES" on expanding health care for South Dakotans.



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