

OxyContin: A Prescription Drug That Killed

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The fact that prescription painkiller OxyContin is a powerful narcotic is well-known, but its maker Purdue Pharma LP tried to mask the equally powerful addictive risks associated with the drug. The Connecticut-based company had informed doctors and the public that OxyContin was less addictive when compared to the other narcotics available on the market.

However as things developed it quickly emerged that OxyContin was a true member of the narcotic family. It got teenagers addicted to it and resulted in general havoc that led its maker to admit that mistakes were made in dispensing with the drug information. In May three of Purdue Pharma's current and former executives had pleaded guilty to charges of misleading the public about the dangerous side effects of OxyContin.

The genesis of the problem can be traced back to 1996 when Purdue Pharma started to "sell" the medication to doctors through focus groups touting OxyContin as being a "safe" long-lasting painkiller. These activities failed to convince doctors who were cautious about the abuse potential of OxyContin.

In order to overcome these reservations and with an eye of financial gain, Purdue began to encourage sales representatives to mislead doctors about OxyContin's addictive risks. For instance, physicians were told that the drug did not produce the intense euphoria that is commonly associated with narcotics like morphine.

Additionally they also cited the lack of withdrawal symptoms associated with OxyContin. The drug, Purdue assured physicians, was safe as any other.

OxyContin is generically oxycodone, which is a potent opioid analgesic. According to the US Food and Drug Administration, OxyContin is intended to help relieve pain that is moderate to severe in intensity, when that pain is present all the time, and expected to continue for a long time.

Because OxyContin produces quick and effective pain relief, doctors began using it extensively in their prescriptions. Sales of the drug boomed and Purdue's bottom line looked lucrative. But it became apparent very soon that OxyContin was one of the country's worst prescription-drug failures.

The present case against Purdue Pharma for misrepresenting OxyContin's side effects was brought in west Virginia, an area that has had to struggle with ever increasing problem of teen drug abuse and a jump in crime rates.

In 1996 there were three deaths attributed to OxyContin, according to William Masello, the assistant chief medical examiner for the region. By 2003 the number of deaths had jumped to 44. Nationwide oxycodone-related deaths had jumped five-fold between 1996 to 2001.

Purdue Pharma admitted that it misled the public about the risks associated with OxyContin. Michael Friedman, who retired last month as Purdue's president, general counsel Howard Udell and former chief medical officer Paul Goldenheim pleaded guilty to charges of misbranding the drug.

U.S. District Judge James Jones levied a fine of \$634.5 million on Purdue Pharma was misrepresenting OxyContin's risks. Of this \$34.5 million will be paid out of the pockets of the three execs. Additionally Jones also ruled that Purdue be placed on probation for five years.

Its three executives were ordered to perform 400 hours of community service and focus of methods to prevent prescription drug abuse. In the four-and-a-half hours of the hearing there were heart rending statements by relatives of those who died from OxyContin. These people said OxyContin had changed their whole perspective on life.

For those affected it was an emotional day, but they were generally disappointed that the company got off lightly despite being responsible for what is surely a horrible crime.

Critics are now asking the FDA to limit the use of OxyContin to people who are suffering from severe pain. But the possibilities of that happening appear remote as of now.

One thing is for sure though; OxyContin changed the very landscape of prescription drug abuse in a manner that will never be forgotten by those affected.