

## Opiates of mass addiction

by: STORIES BY DAVID ZIZZO NewsOK.com  
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After a car accident two years ago, Jason's doctor prescribed pain medicine to help with his whiplash and muscle soreness. Today, the Bethany man and his wife are fighting an addiction that has threatened their jobs, relations with friends and family, their finances and their health.

Fortunately they found the motivation they need to get clean.

"Me and my wife want to have a baby," said Jason, 23.

Jason and his wife, Amy (patients and family in this story asked that their real names be withheld) are among thousands of Oklahomans, many of them young, who have become addicted to opiate-based prescription painkillers. Among those are hydrocodone, sold under brand names including Lortab and Vicodin, and the stronger oxycodone, with brand names such as OxyContin and Percocet.

"Meth is not the big deal anymore," said Eric, 20, a Yukon man who progressed from snorting oxycodone to injecting it up to 12 times a day.

The Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Control says 111 million doses of hydrocodone are prescribed every month in Oklahoma, enough for one dose every day for every person in the state. Oklahoma consumes as much hydrocodone as California, which has 10 times the population.

"That's crazy," the agency's spokesman Mark Woodward said. "We've seen huge increases in the last 10 years, just the amounts of them being filled."

### 'Heroin in pill form'

Dr. Charles Shaw has seen the effects. As an "addictionologist" — one of the relatively small number of physicians who specialize in treating addiction, and a recovering alcoholic who has been sober for 26 years — Shaw considers the current use and abuse of prescription painkillers an epidemic.

He says pharmaceutical companies market them aggressively, government drug agencies "have dropped the ball" in controlling their use and physicians who prescribe them get almost no training on addiction. Shaw is speaking out because of his experiences in treating addicts.

"I kept seeing over and over and over people in their 20s addicted to OxyContin," he said. "Once they took it, they could never get off of it."

OC or oxy, as it's known on the street, is the only opiate that can be swallowed, snorted or injected, Shaw said. "It's just like heroin in pill form. It is worse than heroin."

Eric, a son of an upper-middle class couple, first tried oxy in ninth grade. He got sick and didn't try it again until he was 18 and a roommate gave some to him.

"I just really liked the high," he recalled. "It just makes your body feel really, really good. It just triggers your happy sense."

Of course, after regular use for a short period, the high goes away, and people just take it to keep from facing the miserable withdrawal, he said.

"I wasn't doing it just for the high anymore," he said. "I was doing just to get through my day."

Eric sold much of the plentiful oxy he obtained from sources, some of whom were patients who didn't use all of their prescriptions, and used the rest himself. Until one day when he was 20 and checked himself into a rehab clinic.

"I was just really tired of having to sell pills to support my habit," he said.

### On the down side

Oxycodone is excellent for killing pain. OxyContin can last 12 hours. But such drugs also can make any person who uses them, even as prescribed, physically addicted, Shaw said.

A person who has used them regularly must be weaned off them slowly to avoid painful withdrawal symptoms, he said.

Amy, also 23, recalled suffering severe headaches, aches and pains, diarrhea and other flu-like withdrawal symptoms from the painkillers.

"Basically, it just tears your whole body apart," she said.

Linda, whose son Austin became hooked on oxycodone, said she now knows that the illnesses he complained about while home from college between semesters were actually withdrawal symptoms.

"It answers a lot of questions," she says, looking back.

The symptoms were so serious that she took Austin, an honors student who quit college only a few hours

short of his bachelor's degree, to a hospital.

The staff "acted really, really rude to us," Linda recalled. "Now I know why. They knew what it was. And I looked like an idiot."

For Linda, the truth explained her son's other behaviors that had puzzled her — the dropping grades, the extra thousands of dollars he begged from his parents while still falling behind on rent and car payments. "Come to find out he was just recycling the money and purchasing drugs with it," Linda said.

To escape, the addict needs motivation. Linda said the documentary "Crystal Darkness," about methamphetamine abuse, persuaded Austin to sign up for rehab. Today Austin, who has a good job, is working hard to raise his daughter with the girl's mother, who is leery of marriage because of his addiction, Linda said.

For Jason and Amy, it was the idea of a normal life with money to spend on things other than drugs. And more.

"All of our friends have kids, and we've been wanting to have kids," Jason said. "This was just one thing in our way."

Still, the drugs can be found everywhere, from a parent's medicine cabinet to friends at school.

"That's the hardest thing," Linda said, "how accessible they are."

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**Associate Images:**



Oxycodone pills. JIM BECKEL/The Oklahoman file



**Dr. Charles Shaw of Oklahoma City holds one up for display. JIM BECKEL/The Oklahoman file**

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