

Aniston's 'Cake' shines a light on Rx drug abuse epidemic

Used properly, prescription drugs cure disease, improve the lives of people who suffer from chronic conditions, or ease the pain and suffering of our loved ones recovering from injuries.

But all too often, these drugs are abused. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 120 people in America die every day from overdoses, and more than half of these deaths involve pharmaceuticals. In 2011, more than 1.4 million emergency-department visits were related to prescription medications. And in 2012, more Americans between ages 25 and 64 died from overdoses of prescription or illicit drugs than died in car crashes, making overdose the leading cause of accidental death.

Jennifer Aniston's powerful performance in her new movie "Cake" is helping to bring attention to this

epidemic. In the movie, Aniston's character, Claire, is struggling to overcome the severe physical and emotional pain caused by a car accident that also took the life of her young son. While the movie is fiction, the story is all too real.

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Aniston and the entire team behind the movie should be applauded for drawing important attention to the subjects of pain and medication abuse, and the significant impact these issues can have on individuals, their loved ones and communities. The film rightly shows that successful pain treatment requires more than just medication; it requires an integrated approach to address the physical and emotional aspects of pain.

But the movie tells just one piece of a much bigger story that is currently playing out in communities across

America. Over the past several years, policy makers and law-enforcement officials rushed to address this issue. Some have done so in thoughtful, reasonable ways; others have not.

Florida, which had been labeled the epicenter of the epidemic, led the nation in cracking down on rogue prescribers. In 2010, the Sunshine State was home to 98 of the top 100 doctors who dispensed the highest quantities of pain medication. By 2013, 250 pill mills had been shut down. Last year, no Florida doctors made the top 100 list.

Deaths in Florida attributed to prescription-drug abuse fell by 23 percent from 2010 to 2012, thanks to these efforts.

Sound policies have begun to yield results, but so have the ill-advised approaches to reducing prescription-drug abuse. A lack of clarity in the federal regulations governing drug distributors, pharmacists and prescribers, combined with overzealous federal

enforcement, has spawned a new crisis — one that can be as devastating to individuals and families as the epidemic we are trying to address.

The 100 million Americans who suffer from persistent pain are increasingly having trouble getting access to appropriate treatments. Responsible medical professionals are shying away from treating patients with the condition so no one can confuse them with the bad apples in the profession. One study found that 50 percent of the physicians surveyed were less likely now to prescribe patients pain medications compared to a year ago. Similarly, pharmacists are often unwilling to fill the prescriptions of people with pain and other serious conditions, such as anxiety and addiction.

Similar to Aniston's character in the movie, who in one scene lies down on railroad tracks in front of an approaching train, many people without access to appropriate treatments contemplate suicide.

Also of concern is the alarming rate at which heroin

usage has skyrocketed. In just two years, deaths from heroin overdoses have doubled. This could be happening in part because people who need treatments for pain, anxiety or addiction, for example, are replacing prescription medications with illegal drugs. The inadequacy of therapeutic interventions for people with substance-use disorders is a contributing factor.

Prescription-drug abuse is a complex problem that requires careful attention from policy makers and law enforcement, medical professionals and those living with pain.

Federal officials in Washington, D.C. need to focus their efforts on effectively reducing prescription-drug abuse without restricting access to care. Legislation to clarify the rules governing drug distributors, pharmacists and prescribers is a vital first step for the new Congress. At the same time, leaders in Tallahassee and other state capitals need to focus on ensuring that individuals with substance-use disorders are referred to effective treatment.

Hopefully, "Cake" can inspire a healthy dialogue about pain and addiction, and compel action toward ending the human suffering that exists on both sides of the prescription-drug-abuse epidemic.

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