

U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
“Responding to the Prescription Drug Abuse Epidemic”

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Written Statement of Mary Bono Mack
Member of Congress

U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control
“Responding to the Prescription Drug Abuse Epidemic”
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Good afternoon. I would like to thank my friend and colleague from California, Chairman Feinstein...as well as Co-Chairman Grassley...for this opportunity to testify before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control. We have a deep, shared commitment when it comes to combating prescription drug abuse.

As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade, I have held several hearings on this deadly public health epidemic. And one undeniable fact stands out: The problem of prescription drug abuse is getting worse, and a comprehensive national strategy for combating it is desperately needed.

As Americans, we rally around efforts to fight breast cancer, childhood diseases and other serious health threats. But for far too long, there have only been hushed whispers about prescription drug abuse – now the fastest growing drug problem in America, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

So as the death toll from prescription drug overdoses continues to rise sharply, it’s time to move this story from the obituary page to the front page where it belongs. It’s time to realize that we can’t simply wish this horrific problem away. Not with more than 20,000 people a year dying from it. Not when the number of babies born addicted to the class of drugs that includes prescription painkillers has tripled in the past decade. Not when nearly one out of 4 high school seniors has used prescription painkillers.

This is nothing less than a national tragedy. If 20,000 people died each year from food poisoning, Americans would demand immediate action.

So why has it taken so long for our governmental agencies to get serious about combating prescription drug abuse?

Why did the Food and Drug Administration, for example, spend nearly three years before deciding this month that drug companies which make “extended release or long-acting painkillers” must provide expanded education to prescribers and consumers about the dangers and risks of addiction? How many people have died needlessly in the meantime? Instead of three years, it should have taken the FDA about three minutes to take action after looking at the skyrocketing statistics and horror stories all across America.

So what’s the answer? I believe one critically important first step is to do a better job of monitoring and limiting access to prescription drugs containing controlled-release oxycodone hydrochloride, including the popular pain killer OxyContin.

Originally, OxyContin was intended to be prescribed only for severe pain as a way to help patients dealing with late-stage cancer and other severe illnesses. Today, however, more and more people across America are being prescribed OxyContin, as well as other generic oxycodone drugs, for less severe reasons – clinically known as moderate pain – greatly expanding the availability and potential for abuse of these powerfully-addictive narcotics.

Consider this: The Drug Enforcement Administration has conducted four national drug take-back days over the past year and a half and has collected an astonishing 1.5 million pounds of unused and unneeded medicines. That's 1.5 million "pounds" – not pills – in just four days.

Compounding the problem is an often-times false sense of security: "If it's approved by the FDA and prescribed by a doctor then it must be okay." But too many pills taken at once, or combining them with other drugs, and alcohol, can have serious and even deadly consequences.

Today, the black market sale of powerful and highly-addictive narcotic painkillers, such as Oxycontin and Vicodin, is big business, prompting the DEA to attack the problem on multiple fronts – from street level sales all the way to the top of the supply chain.

But there's another, more insidious side of this story as well. After becoming addicted to prescription painkillers, law enforcement authorities say more and more people are switching to heroin. In San Diego County – which borders my district – drug treatment experts say the use of heroin by young adults has more than tripled since 2006.

Much of this growth is due to people who have switched to heroin as a cheaper alternative to OxyContin.

Personally, I will never forget the chilling phone call I received one night from a Palm Springs man who told me his son had a gun pointed at his head because he couldn't pay the "street price" of Oxy.

While we're starting to see some progress in the fight against prescription drug abuse, a lot more clearly has to be done.

By better coordinating the efforts of local, state and national agencies – and by reducing the supply of highly addictive opioid painkillers – I am convinced that we can eventually save thousands of lives... and spare millions of American families from the devastating heartache of addiction.

Thank you, Chairman Feinstein, and members of the caucus, for your personal commitment to this critically important issue.