

Opioid addiction and work injuries: Getting to the root of the problem

“The General Contractors are pushing contractors harder and faster. Instead of slowing the pace and making working safer, tradesmen are forced to go to doctors for pain medication. Over time you’re hooked and can’t live without them. Game over.”

“People get hurt and don’t report the injury for fear of losing their job, so they mask the pain with pills.”

Quotes from Mystic Valley Public Health Coalition Substance Abuse and Trade Labor Workforce Assessment Study 2016

Background

National COSH is a nonprofit network of 21 local and state coalitions and an umbrella for individual community, labor, academic and legal activists with a shared mission of promoting safe, healthy workplaces for all working people.

Over the past few years, low wage workers reported similar situations to COSH affiliates:

- Many workers were turning to opiate medications to relieve pain from a work injury in order to continue earning their living;
- Many workers relied on painkillers because they were unable to access essential medical treatment either due to a fear of employer retaliation, lack of familiarity with workers compensation, or the workers compensation process was lengthy.

National COSH recently established an opiate workgroup of community, academic and labor health and safety activists to investigate the connection between work injuries and the use of painkillers. We sought to identify existing studies and initiate new ones to fill gaps, to identify a range of approaches to addressing the continuum of issues – from the entry point to treatment that could reduce the risk of addiction and death.

Noteworthy research findings

- A substantial portion of opioid overdose deaths are those who had suffered a work injury:

- Studies in Utah found that 57% of those who had an opioid related overdose death had suffered a work-related injury; 13% had experienced a work-related injury within three years of their death¹

Higher rates of opioid overdose fatalities are found in occupations with the highest rates of injuries:

- A study by the Mystic Valley Public Health Coalition found that 43% of those who died from opiate overdose worked in the building trades and/or laborers².

¹ Comparison of opioid-related deaths by work-related injury, Melissa Cheng, Brian Sauer, et al; American Journal of Industrial Medicine, November, 2012

² Mystic Valley Public Health Coalition, Opiate overdoses and Trades powerpoint, 2016
<http://masstapp.edc.org/sites/masstapp.edc.org/files/MVPHC%20trades%20data%20%20strategy%20quick%2>

- A study by the Barnstable County Human Services found that 58% of those killed from opiate were employed in the Construction, Building/Grounds Maintenance, and Repair occupations³.

Those working in construction during 2004-2014 were (on average) at 4.63 times greater risk of dying from opioid overdose than were workers in other occupations.

- Dangerous work exposures are correlated with opiate use and overdoses.

Barnstable County, as well as Mystic Valley, included in its conclusions:

- Physical working conditions (e.g. exposure to hazardous chemicals and weather), physical demands (e.g. carrying heavy loads), and repetitive motions cause wear and tear on muscles and joints causing chronic pain.
- Exposure to physical injury on the job exhibits a strong social gradient, wherein the least skilled and lowest paid workers are at the greatest risk for injury.
- A lack of affordable employer-provided health insurance may affect how these workers manage their pain and self-medication may be a norm.

Gap in research and practices:

National COSH and our network of organizations across the country have the relationships and experience in participatory research to build on existing research to fill in gaps – reaching populations that are hard to reach and engaging in qualitative research to deepen our understanding of these issues.

We are seeking a collaboration between our COSH affiliates and university or state partners to engage in qualitative and/or intervention research areas, such as:

- Investigating factors that influence pathways from occupational injury to use and abuse of pain medications in at risk populations that tend to not be in current data sources, including low wage immigrant, service workers and workers in the underground economy – such as day laborers and temporary workers.
- Piloting educational approaches that seek to halt the path to painkiller overuse and abuse through novel approaches such as peer-training models that educate workers about opioid painkillers and work injuries, and empower them to address hazards that cause injuries and to navigate the medical treatment process in a way that expedites treatment and reduces painkiller use.

[Osheet-general_0.pdf](#)

³ Barnstable County Analysis of Opiate-Related Overdose Deaths on Cape Cod, 2004 – 2014
<https://www.bchumanservices.net/library/2017/10/Barnstable-County-Death-Records-2004-2014-Trades-STW-Presentation-10-5-17.pdf>

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