Opioid Addiction Treatment Drug Almost Exclusively Going to Whites; Black Death Rate Rises, Study Finds

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Buprenorphine, the medication used to help people who are struggling with opioid addiction, is mostly going to white drug users, according to a new study from the University of Michigan. The study appears in JAMA Psychiatry and shows that the drug is almost exclusively going to whites, despite the rising rate of opioid overdose-related fatalities among black people.

Also known by the brand name Suboxone, buprenorphine is being prescribed far more often to white drug users addicted to heroin, Fentanyl, and other opioids. The drug is effective because it helps keep opioid cravings under control. It, therefore, reduces the likelihood that a person will abuse their opioids. Buprenorphine can also reduce the chance of a fatal overdose. Buprenorphine helps people in recovery stay in recovery until they get better.

Researchers reviewed two national surveys of physician-reported prescriptions. Between 2012 and 2015, researchers assessed 13.4 million medical cases involving the drug, wherein a doctor or a nurse prescribed buprenorphine. However, they did not find an increase in prescriptions written for African Americans and other minorities. The prescriptions remained the same even as overdose deaths surged in many states.

?White populations are almost 35 times as likely to have a buprenorphine-related visit than black Americans,? said Dr. Pooja Lagisetty, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School and the study's corresponding author.

This dominant use of buprenorphine among white people occurred at the same time opioid overdose deaths were rising faster for blacks than for whites. Click the link to see Houston's top rehab placement programs.

?This epidemic over the last few years has been framed by many as largely a white epidemic, but we know now that's not true,? Lagisetty added.

The reason for this may have something to do with accessibility. Most white patients either paid cash or relied

on private insurance to fund their buprenorphine treatment. 40 percent were able to pay in cash, while 35 percent relief on their insurance.

Only 25 percent of the visits were paid for through Medicaid and Medicare, showing that these hospital visits could be very costly for persons of low income.

According to Dr. Andrew Kolodny, co-director of Opioid Policy Research at Brandeis University, doctors and nurses can demand cash payments because there is a shortage of clinicians who can prescribe buprenorphine. Only five percent of physicians have taken the special training required to be able to prescribe the drug.

?The few that are doing it are really able to name their price, and that's what we're seeing here and that's the reason why individuals with more resources ? who are more likely to be white ? are more likely to access treatment with buprenorphine,? says Kolodny, who was not involved in the study.

Kolodny suggests that the federal government eliminate the required special training for buprenorphine, as well as the cap on the number of patients a doctor can manage on the drug.

Some physicians have studied racial disparities in addiction treatment and have traced the root to the year 2000 when buprenorphine was first approved.

Buprenorphine was introduced as a private office treatment for a private market, particularly those with the capability to pay, according to Dr. Helena Hansen at New York University. ?So the unequal dissemination of buprenorphine for opioid dependence is not accidental.?

Hansen added that in order to fix this, the government must include universal access to treatment in a primary care setting. Ending the criminalization of opioid dependence will also go a long way, considering that more blacks are put in prison for drug use than whites.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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