Federal Scientists Warned of Coming Opioid Epidemic as Early as 2006

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Two of the government?s top scientists detected the earliest signs of the emerging opioid crisis back in 2006. They also attempted to warn health officials and the public about the coming epidemic, according to a confidential document obtained by POLITICO.

The effort, however, did not lead to any real action, even as the death toll and addiction rates climbed. More than 133,000 people have died from prescription opioids since then.

The scientists? March 15, 2006 memo was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. It shows that the directors from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Institutes of Health flagged ?disturbing? data showing a dramatic uptick in opioid addiction, including those among teenagers. The memo also requested urgent action.

The agency directors wanted then-US Surgeon General Richard Carmona to alert the public to the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

The memo from Nora Volkow, director of NIDA, led Carmona to agree that an official call to action must be issued in order to capture the public?s attention and raise awareness about the emerging public health crisis.

Volkow wrote: ?Given the startling statistics, efforts to heighten awareness of this problem should be a top public health priority.?

However, the action sparked with the memo faded in months as the health agencies focused on other issues. The crisis then exploded. Around 130 Americans die each day because of the current opioid epidemic. Then came Fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that has been the driving factor behind overdose spikes in recent years.

Carmona told POLITICO that staff from various health agencies had assembled to lay the groundwork. But a few months after Volkow sent her memo, Carmona?s term ended. An acting surgeon general took over, and what little momentum they have built for public warning evaporated.

The call to action could have been the first major attempt by the federal government to counteract the aggressive marketing and prescribing of painkillers. Other issues ultimately became the priority for government agencies, even while the opioid situation worsened.

?We were dealing with global health, national preparedness after September 11th, bioterrorism,? Carmona said. He added that he was also focused on the country?s obesity epidemic. ?The crisis was in its infancy. It wasn?t like we dropped the ball.?

Carmona also said that health officials did not have the kind of granular data that exists now. However, it is worth noting that Volkow?s memo included a number of statistics pulled from federal data, showing the signs of an emerging crisis. The memo showed the uptick in abuses of OxyContin, Vicodin, and other prescription drugs among high schoolers.

?NIDA?s 2005 Monitoring the Future Survey revealed that approximately 1 out of 10 high school students will have abused Vicodin before graduating,? Volkow wrote. ?This statistic is alarming, especially when one considers that this drug is not the only prescription being abused.?

Volkow also pointed to a separate NIDA study that found more than 1.6 million American teens and young adults had misused a prescription stimulant during a 12-month period. 75,000 of these became addicted. Click the link to see White Plain's top rehab placement programs.

Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health also showed that an estimated 6 million people in 2004 reported current nonmedical use of a prescription psychoactive drug.

?We have seen increases in the abuse of sedatives and OxyContin among 12th graders as well as a disturbing level of abuse of prescription stimulant medications,? she wrote.

In an emailed statement, Carmona said: ?I regularly brief NIH and HHS leadership on developing substance use trends, particularly among teenagers and young adults since they are the ones most vulnerable to the effects of drugs, as I did at a meeting in 2006 with then Surgeon General Richard Carmona. The Surgeon General was receptive to the concerns outlined in the meeting.?

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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