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How the Opioid Overdose and Death Epidemic Can Be Reversed

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(StatePoint) Opioid-related overdoses have reached epidemic proportions, claiming more than 42,000 lives in the U.S. in 2016 alone. Physicians on the front lines are working in their communities and with their patients to reverse this public health crisis.

The American Medical Association (AMA) created an Opioid Task Force in 2014, bringing together national and state medical organizations to come up with ways that practicing physicians could play a role in ending the epidemic. For example, the task force urged physicians to enhance their education.

The latest AMA report shows a remarkable response. Last year, more than a half million physicians and other health care providers took courses related to opioid prescribing, pain management, treatment and related areas. Opioid prescribing decreased by 22 percent between 2013 and 2017.

Despite such progress, opioid-related deaths are still increasing. Why? Experts say no single policy approach can stop the epidemic. Physicians are reducing the prescription opioid supply. But policies must also focus on prevention and treatment. About 90 percent of those needing addiction treatment are unable to get it.

The science shows what works: certain medications prescribed by a physician or dispensed at federally certified opioid treatment programs. Combining that treatment with medical care, counseling and other services can help patients with substance use disorder lead satisfying and productive lives.

"The numbers speak to a national tragedy. We need to act with resolve as we have with other public health epidemics. Our patients diagnosed with a substance use disorder deserve no less," says AMA president-elect Patrice A. Harris, MD. "Most people agree that we need access to treatments that include medication but that is not readily available for many patients. This epidemic will not be reversed until we deal with access issues and stigma associated with opioid misuse."

Specific actions that should be taken, according to Dr. Harris include:

- Insurance providers should immediately remove barriers so patients can obtain affordable medication treatment combined with counseling.

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- Policymakers and regulators should enforce laws that require mental health benefits to be on par with other health benefits. This gives patients access to treatment related to mental health and opioid use disorders.
- Health insurance providers and pharmacy benefit managers should ensure that patients have access to affordable, non-opioid pain care.
- Physicians should register for and use electronic databases that track controlled substance prescriptions in their state. Using these databases allows physicians to make more informed prescribing decisions. When clinically appropriate, physicians should also co-prescribe naloxone, a life-saving drug that can reverse an opioid-related overdose.
- Patients and physicians should have conversations about safe storage and disposal of opioids and all medications.

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• All Americans can help remove the stigma around this epidemic, advocating for comprehensive care for patients in pain and those with opioid use disorder.

To learn more about efforts to end the opioid epidemic, visit end-opioid-epidemic.org.

"There are many reasons to be optimistic. Physicians are leading in the areas where we can have an influence, but unfortunately, we cannot bring an end to the epidemic alone," says Dr. Harris. "Much work remains to be done and we'll continue to work with federal and state governments, law enforcement, insurers, educators and others to make headway."



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