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Codeine

The drug codeine is used in many countries as an over the counter remedy for mild to moderate pain and for suppressing cold symptoms. Codeine has recently been a great topic of controversy due to its addictive properties, potential for dangerous outcomes and the relative ease of attaining the drug. In this paper, we will review the dangers of codeine by examining background articles that describe the effects of the drug, then we will review articles that describe some of the resulting regulations and recommendations suggested in order to moderate the nefarious effects of the drug, and we will conclude the paper by examining a case study of codeine addiction.

As previously mentioned, codeine, is a highly addictive drug. Codeine comes from the same family as opiates that heroin comes from. However, codeine’s modern and common day use is that of an everyday pain killer or cough suppressant given to adults and children alike (Whitcroft). The benefit of codeine as a cough-suppressant is said to be ineffective. Codeine’s apparent danger arises from the inconsistencies in its effect on individuals based on multiple genetic components. Studies have verified that codeine taken in appropriate physician recommended doses can be deadly to those with certain combinations of genetic components. These studies have found that children are in this high-risk group for adverse effects after the consumption of codeine. The liver breaks the codeine down into morphine; however, it appears that the amount and concentration of resulting morphine is inconsistent and unpredictable due to variations in genetics. Some experts believe that codeine should be removed from all children’s medications and that a general ban on the drug should be considered. In cases of pain, some experts suggested that morphine should be used in its place, because morphine’s effects are more predictable and consistent (Conner).

Regulations to curb both the dangerous effects of codeine and the highly addictive nature of the drug have been issued worldwide. In Britain the regulations include limiting the amount of pills that can be in an over-the-counter medication package and a label on the front of the packaging which cautions that codeine can cause addiction after three days. Women have been found to have a higher susceptibility to codeine addiction. People have previously been allowed to make bulk purchases of the drug; due to its highly addictive nature, such purchases will no longer be permitted. The hope is that these new measures will both educate and reduce dependency among the population (Hope). The US and other countries world-wide all have very similar restrictions. In Australia the regulations on over-the-counter medications that include the drug codeine are as follows: packs that have over 12 milligrams of codeine in them will be kept behind the counter (a pharmacist will have to record some details of the patient purchasing the medication) and mandatory doctor’s scripts to acquire packets that contain forty-eight or more pills (Olding). When an over the counter drug as popular as codeine is given such restrictions there are bound to be some adverse results. The estimated resulting cost to Australian health care increasing billions because of a rise in doctor’s appointments, which will now be necessary to obtain medications previously readily available. Every time someone has a small ailment, they will need to schedule a doctor’s appointment in order to receive treatment. The pharmacist will now have much more paperwork. The criticism to the pharmacist’s role is that there is no inter-pharmaceutical database housing this patient information on those purchasing codeine making the recording of this information futile; as any codeine abuser can visit different pharmacies and purchase multiple packets at different locations without any oversight or suspicion (Olding).

The dangerous effects of codeine also lie in its ability to create chemical dependency. The psychological nature of being addicted to a pain medication is unique in that you begin taking the drug in order to alleviate your legitimate physical pain; however, this can eventuate in taking the drug in order to alleviate, prevent, or cope with any pain or inconvenience in one’s life. Those prescribed the medication codeine should take the drug as prescribed and ONLY as prescribed because of the non-discriminating, highly addictive nature of the drug. Codeine addiction and dependency can be deadly and those addicted need to seek help immediately. Just like any other addicts, codeine addicts can cause discomfort and damage to their loved ones due to the addiction and its tendency to cause a euphoric apathy to situations while under its influence (Urell, Bill).

The treatment of codeine addiction includes self-acceptance of addition as the primary step of the addict’s recovery. The addict themselves must want treatment in order to obtain successful rehabilitation. A “three-month codeine addiction treatment program is ideal” for recovery (Urell, Bill). Physical detoxification is necessary for codeine recovery. Although physical detoxification is difficult and important, developing new skills for the addict to circumvent usage is essential. The addict must learn to cope and react to the triggers and cues that cause the psychological aspect of the addiction. Seeking professional help is essential, as research has shown that those who seek professional help for chemical dependency are more likely to succeed. Will power alone will not be sufficient for the recovery of addiction, as the addict must develop new/ improved coping mechanisms for pain (Urell, Bill).

In order to truly understand the nature of a specific chemical dependency, it is important to examine a case study. In this essay the case study will be in the form of a personal narrative from a former addict. These narratives allow us to empathize with the addicts and their family and understand how the addiction progressed. The short narrative I chose is that of Mark Edwards, who appears to be an average British man; he has a wife, three children and is a successful computer programmer. Mark had a medical incident that resulted in temporary minor pain and discomfort. In order to alleviate this pain, he began to take over-the-counter pain medications on a regular basis. Thirteen years after the medical incident, he was still taking the pain-killers but in significantly higher doses. When Mark attempted to stop taking the pain-killers, he would experience body aches, headaches, shakes, insomnia and depression. While he realized that he was taking too many pills, he was unaware he had become an addict. Taking these pills had become a part of Mark’s daily routine, just as taking vitamins might be to an average person. Mark did not know that he could develop a physical dependency from over-the-counter medications and did not realize the danger he was in. Mark had always figured that because he was buying this medication without a prescription, it was safe. Although he had long ago exceeded the daily recommended dose, he had never felt ill from the medication, it was only when he ceased taking them that he began to feel physical discomfort. At this point, Mark had begun to develop typical addict behaviors. He was hiding the fact that he was taking large quantities of the pills from his family and also buying the pills at many different pharmacies so as not to arouse the suspicion of pharmacist. However for Mark, these addiction behaviors were not red flags, he believed that it was on par with hiding an odd eating habit. After the occurrence of another medical incident Mark realized that he was a codeine addict and sought recovery. Mark’s story is important because it contains similarities to the progression of chemical dependency shared by other codeine addicts and highlights the fact that many co-dependent people could be ignorant of their addiction, or of the physical danger they are in (Whitcroft).

Codeine is a drug that can be extremely useful for the numbing of minor to moderate pain. Unfortunately, codeine can also be dangerous; potentially causing death to infants, having unpredictable effects that can mimic the dangers of morphine without the consistency in dose awareness and causing an addiction that has been called “the silent addiction” (Whitcroft). The real question to ask is whether the potential dangers of codeine outweigh the possible benefits? Many countries, like Australia, have already answered through regulation and restriction that the benefits do not outweigh the risk. In Australia, they have greatly limited the amount and dosage of codeine that can be purchased without a prescription. My prediction is that the regulations and restrictions on the codeine that can be purchased without prescriptions will increase as more research comes out on the public risk that this drug causes.

Sourced Research

 Research is an integral component of any paper. In this paper, it was necessary to research codeine and then to research the sources used to compile the necessary data about the drug. Since codeine use and drug use, in general, is a topic of great controversy, one’s standing on the political special spectrum can greatly bias their ability to report and present information. The following is the information gathered on the biased stance of the publisher and the author of each source used: The website “Ezine Articles”, where the article “Codeine Addiction: Relevant Facts” was taken from, is a free, open database that provides articles on any subject, submitted by authors, field professionals and writers after quality review. (EZINE articles) The author Bill Urell is a former addict who has been clean for fifteen years. Urell is an addiction therapist that specializes in the treatment of adults with chemical dependencies (Urell, Frank).

The article “Do the Dangers of Codeine Outweigh the Benefits” is a prescriptive article written by Steve Connor and published by The Independent. The Independent is a British national morning newspaper that has a tendency to lean to the left of the political scale (Quinn). The author Steve Connor is the science editor of “The Independent” (Conner).

The article “Tough new controls for everyday painkillers that can become addictive after three days” is a brief informative article written by Jenny Hope and Tamara Cohen, published by Mail Online. Mail Online is the online delivery mechanism for the British national daily newspaper, Daily Mail. Daily Mail typically has political leanings to the right of the political spectrum and writes for its target audience of women (Quinn).

The article “Codeine Ban will induce headaches: pharmacists” is a short op-ed styled article written by Rachel Olding and published by The Sydney Morning Herald. The Sydney Morning Herald is an Australian national daily newspaper with leanings toward the political right (Bahnisch).

The article “The Silent Addiction to Everyday Painkillers” is written by Isla Whitcroft, and published by Mail Online. Mail Online is the online manifestation of the British national daily newspaper, Daily Mail. Daily Mail typically has political leanings to the right has been known to target female readers as an audience (Quinn).

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