
EDITORIAL: State must address its serious opioid problem

Posted Jun 8, 2017 at 9:53 AM

Updated Jun 8, 2017 at 11:27 AM

Alabama has more opioid painkiller prescriptions than people. Doctors have written enough prescriptions for the highly addictive and deadly drugs that every man, woman and child who resides in this state can have some, and have plenty left over.

The problem is worse here than anywhere else, according to several studies. One study by QuintilesIMS released earlier this year said there are 1.18 opioid prescriptions per person in Alabama, the worst ratio of all states.

Pharmaceutical companies have to know they are shipping more of these drugs to Alabama than is needed. Doctors are prescribing these drugs. Pharmacies are filling these prescriptions. And when these drugs become too costly or the prescription ends, the addicts who have been created by this system turn to a cheap, increasingly easily available alternative that satisfies the addiction: heroin. Often, the heroin is laced with a powerful synthetic opioid known as fentanyl.

These addicts aren't like those depicted on television shows in the 1980s. Few are staggering around street corners in rags looking like they haven't bathed in weeks. They're often students, parents or professionals who have families who love them.

And lots of them are dying. Earlier this week, preliminary data collected by The New York Times found that overdoses are now the leading cause of death of Americans under the age of 50. Think about that. More people under 50 now die from overdoses than from disease, car crashes or gun violence.

Tuesday, Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office Chief Loyd Baker told those attending a meeting of the local League of Women Voters that "drugs are the underlying current, affecting everything we do." He said about two dozen people die each year from opioid overdoses in Tuscaloosa County.

Pharmaceutical companies remain one of the biggest political contributors year in and year out. There is no wonder why. We rarely hear of doctors and pharmacists losing their licenses and going to jail in Alabama or anywhere else. Instead, the attention seems to be on the relaxed attitudes about marijuana in states in other regions of the country. There has never been a single recorded death as the result of a marijuana overdose, but arrests still keep piling up for those caught with the plant. Meanwhile, these legally produced pills are flowing through our southern streets like water after a thunderstorm, killing our youth, and there is little outcry against the system that provides it.

Leaders in other states are taking action. In May, Ohio filed a lawsuit against the pharmaceutical industry and accused several legal, publicly-traded drug makers of launching marketing campaigns that were designed to mislead doctors and patients about the dangers of their products. Mississippi was the first to take the step, in 2015. That case is still pending. West Virginia went after big

pharmaceutical companies and won tens of millions of dollars in a settlement. Counties and cities, like Chicago, have also started litigation. Alabama ought to do the same. Enough is enough.