ABSTRACT

CREATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT: The New Front of America’s War on Drugs: An Exploration of the Rise in Prescription Narcotic Medication, the Problems Associated With This Increase and Possible Policy Responses to This Problem

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America has been fighting a “war on drugs” within its boundaries for many years, with the fight mainly focusing on drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin, as those seem to be the drugs of choice. In fact, over the years, America has spent billions of dollars in an effort to eradicate illegal drugs by waging an all-out “war,” complete with “colorfully named operations, targets who have gained enough prominence to be worth destroying, various products that have become the focus of the crusades, and from time to time new countries to be denounced and blamed” (Bowden, 2005). Today, however, America’s “war on drugs” has encountered a relatively new front and a growing problem: the abuse and illegal sales of prescription drugs. Narcotic pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives are all frequently abused prescription drugs; however, this paper will specifically focus on narcotic pain killers.

According to a recent study conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2011), between 1991 and 2010, opioid analgesic prescriptions jumped from approximately 30 million prescriptions per year to more than 180 million prescriptions per year. With that said, based on
this research, one could easily conclude that narcotic pain killers are much more prevalent today than they have been in past decades. The questions then becomes, what is causing this explosion of narcotic prescriptions, and what government regulations can be and or should be enacted to better regulate and diminish their easy availability?

Narcotic pain killers have been around for thousands of years, and serve a very useful medical purpose when used properly. Opioid analgesics do exactly what their name implies: they relieve moderate to extreme pain. The problem is, because of their pharmacological make-up, many are both physiologically and psychologically addictive. In fact, even when monitored properly, a person could become dependent on these drugs and experience withdrawal symptoms when usage stops. The abuse of opioid analgesics would include: the intentional use of prescription narcotics without a prescription; the intentional use of prescribed narcotics in a way other than prescribed, such as excessive use; and the use of prescription narcotics for the sole purpose of achieving intoxication, also known as, “getting high.” According to the National Institute for Drug Abuse (2011) reported that in 2009, approximately 5.3 million people admitted to using narcotic pain relievers for non-medical purposes.

Ultimately, the underlying enemy of the drug war is demand, and solely “declaring drugs to be illegal do not alter the laws of supply, especially when it applies to the world’s most profitable business (Ojeda, 2001).” Unfortunately, current governmental efforts and legislation have not been able to control the laws of supply and demand with regards to prescription narcotic medication. This paper will explore the rise in prescription narcotic medication, the problems associated with this increase, the need for government intervention, and it will examine possible policy responses to this problem. This will be accomplished through a conceptual and empirical review of peer and non-peer reviewed conducted research literature. It will also survey the author’s own experiences with this problem, as collected over the last couple years.