
Commentary to Gary Mendell's Article Titled "Addressing the Addiction Crisis during a Pandemic"

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Description

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to wear on, and it has changed so much about our lives. For many, it has led to increased isolation, economic struggle, and a newfound, constant uncertainty. As a result, our country's addiction crisis, which was already dire before the coronavirus outbreak, has now become significantly worse.

Over 87,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States in the 12 months ending in May 2020, which is the largest number of overdose deaths ever in recorded history. This compares to approximately 70K for calendar year 2019 when it appeared deaths were leveling off with even a modest decline in 2018. For historical context, overdose deaths in 2000 were approximately 17,000.

Sadly, these figures are just for deaths from drug overdoses and do not take into the account the rising unhealthy relationship and subsequent rise in addiction to alcohol that has occurred over the past year. Pre-pandemic excessive alcohol use was responsible for more than 95,000 deaths a year in the United States alone. The numbers are not known yet, but between February and April of 2020, RTI International's study, found a significant increase in drinking in terms of increasing the number of drinks per day, binge drinking and excessive drinking.

Notably there has been a noteworthy increase in alcohol use disorder and alcohol related deaths in white, non-Hispanic women. Coincidentally, a recent study has shown that alcohol use has risen during the pandemic with greater increase in misuse among women.

Additionally, Express Scripts found that there was a 34% increase in prescriptions for benzodiazepines between February and March. These medications are used to treat anxiety and include Xanax.

It is also important to mention the deadly infiltration of synthetic opioids, notably fentanyl, into our country, which has seriously impacted the number of deadly overdoses.

Our nation is in crisis on many levels and many people turned to substances to cope with their anxieties, fears and uncertainties. Now more than ever people need access to quality addiction treatment.

I know firsthand how deadly a lack of quality care can be. I lost my son, Brian, in 2011, after he cycled through eight different addiction treatment programs. Not one of those programs offered Brain treatment that was based on the most recent science. I know that my family is not alone in our suffering. Each day in this country, hundreds of Americans die from addiction to alcohol and other drugs, leaving hundreds of families shattered. Tragically, the science exists to reduce many of these deaths, but it is not being used.

Shatterproof is transforming the healthcare delivery system via ATLAS®, our quality measurement system, so that every person facing addiction has access to quality care and treatment based on science, just like any other disease. ATLAS will help to transform the treatment system in the United States by delivering valuable information to states, health insurers and treatment facilities to enable data-driven and continuous quality improvement.

Equally important, ATLAS is already helping those searching for treatment for themselves or a loved one locate addiction treatment facilities that provide evidence based high-quality care.

ATLAS has been piloted in six states: Delaware, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina and West Virginia and will be growing to more states this coming year.

Let's be clear: Addiction is a treatable illness and needs a pandemic-like response immediately.
