

**A review of *American Overdose: The Opioid Tragedy in Three Acts*, by Chris McGreal**

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Much of the current research on opioid use has shifted focus from causes towards intervention and treatments. This turn is largely a function of increased efforts to decrease high addiction rates, and rightfully so because opioid dependence takes many lives and wreaks havoc on thousands of families and communities across the U.S. What is the direct cause of the opioid epidemic? Chris McGreal shows that it began with the mass prescribing of opioids. He examines the people and places in the “rust belt” and Appalachian regions of the U.S. that fell victim to prescription opioids. He also explains the spread of opioid addiction and how it became the deadliest drug epidemic in our country’s history. In fact, it “is a largely American epidemic” and McGreal reminds us that the U.S. consumes more than 80% of the world’s opioid painkillers (p. xiv).

McGreal’s main goal is to sensitize readers to the fact that the opioid crisis and the overwhelming number of overdoses were caused by pursuit of profits. He thoroughly illustrates how Big Pharma with their corrupt marketing, qualified but unethical doctors, and poor drug regulation targeted the working poor, which got them hooked on opioid painkillers. Having one of the highest opioid overdose rates, McGreal focuses his late 1990’s and early 2000’s research on West Virginia, in particular the town of Williamson. It is not only where many people became addicted to opioids, but it was also a major prescription distribution center. Actually, McGreal depicts Williamson as one of the biggest “pill mills” in the country.

The Appalachian region is the “launching pad” for the so-called “legitimate” distribution of opioids. McGreal provides a concrete example of exactly how these types of operations worked, as well as the initiatives to get people hooked. He introduces Henry Vinson, who is responsible for opening a wellness center in Williamson that hired a team of doctors to prescribe thousands of painkillers a day, specifically OxyContin. Anyone could get a prescription, as long as they could pay cash for it, without the doctors appropriately and routinely examining the patients as is done at legitimate, traditional visits.

Pharmaceutical companies are responsible for the evolution of the epidemic. More specifically, Purdue pharma publicly downplayed the likelihood of being addicted to OxyContin. In reality, OxyContin was scheduled under a particular category due to its addictive nature.



Another major issue raised in McGreal's offering is the test trials of opioids. He documents how some doctors used wishful thinking instead of scientific evidence to prove their case. They claimed that OxyContin can be used for a long period of time, with few side effects, and addiction or abuse was not a problem. After the damage was done, the doctors would later report their claims had little basis and there were no scientific studies to support them. Furthermore, clinical trials or adequate testing of these drugs were never conducted in a concise or typical manner.

McGreal's book should be commended for exposing the Purdue's misleading and corrupt actions in Williamson, which later spread out into surrounding areas across the U.S. He also reveals how these large medical companies manipulate or unfairly influence people in dire need of pain management. These corporations led people to believe that opioids would end their pain with minimal to no side effects when in fact opioids are addictive and do not have long-term pain management capabilities.

McGreal reminds us that big pharmaceutical companies, as well as medical professionals, should be held accountable for contributing to the epidemic. Most people who are addicted to opioids are not criminals. Rather, they were manipulated, vulnerable, taken advantage of. Appalachian people were the first to believe Purdue that OxyContin would help them live pain free, which is now known to be false. Misleading claims and false promises were made to a vulnerable population by these major corporations. One of McGreal's main objectives is to shed light on the many missed opportunities for Purdue and other companies to thoroughly examine and test opioids to truthfully and accurately report their side effects and long-term outcomes to patients. Unfortunately, as McGreal observes, the pharmaceutical industry worked hard to avoid examining whether the benefits of OxyContin outweighed the risks.

One of the things that makes McGreal's work unique is that it shows that the magnitude of the crisis did not mistakenly happen. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration declared that the opioid epidemic is one of the greatest mistakes in modern American medical history. A pharmaceutical company successfully capitalized on people's pain, especially that of working class people, and profited from their vulnerability and need for pain management. Furthermore, McGreal's book is another reminder that health care is a business in the U.S., whereas in other countries, such as Canada, it is a service.

Another major strength of McGreal's work is that it challenges the stigma associated with addiction. Much of the current research narrowly focuses on treatment and interventions for addiction and loses sight of the life-long label attached to addicted people. Again, people were not experimenting with opioids for recreational purposes. To be more precise, they consumed them because they were prescribed by trained medical professionals. McGreal directs us to who the real criminals are and who fell victim to their lies and deception.

Where do we go from here? One of McGreal's solutions is reducing prescriptions and finding alternative pain management strategies. Unfortunately, the opioid epidemic will not subside anytime soon. Since 1999, an estimated 350,000 Americans have died due to opioid addiction. Nonetheless, McGreal has exposed the "drug dealers in white coats" by making explicit how the pharmaceutical industry, Food and Drug Administration, Congress, and other medical personnel who pushed these lethal painkillers wrecked so many lives and communities for over a decade. This is hardly a trivial achievement because the first step toward solving a problem is naming it.