Lesson Plan
An Opioid Epidemic for Whom?
2017

Purpose
The purpose of this lesson plan is to learn about the various factors contributing to the opioid epidemic in the United States, and to place it within a larger global context. Prior to this lesson, students will be assigned two articles to read: one academic paper for public health professionals that provides an overview of the crisis from an American perspective, and an article from The Economist geared towards lay audiences that draws a contrast between the opioid epidemic in the U.S. and the dearth of pain relief medications available in low- and middle-income countries. Through a structured role-play activity, students will discuss the complex ways responses to the epidemic in the U.S. may impact the provision of palliative care globally.

Learner Level
Undergraduate, Graduate

Time
One 1-hour session

Required Materials
- Dry-erase board or chalkboard

Required Pre-Reading
Prior to this lesson, students must complete the following two readings. Class activities will be centered on the article from The Economist; however all students must read and be familiar with the content in the review article as well, as it provides necessary background information that will be reflected in their contributions to class discussions.

Case Summary

Approaches taken to address the opioid epidemic in the United States can be considered within a broad public health prevention framework involving primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts. Within the realm of primary prevention (i.e. reducing the incidence of addiction), strategies have involved education campaigns and mandatory trainings aimed at teaching physicians about the dangers of opioid addiction in order to change prescribing practices, as well as regulations around discarding excess drugs, and education campaigns teaching the public about the risks of overuse. In terms of secondary prevention (i.e. treating addiction before it causes serious impairment to one’s health and well-being), efforts have focused on early identification and referral of addicted individuals for treatment, which has been historically challenging since patients often do not present clear outward signs of drug-seeking behaviors. Lastly, tertiary prevention approaches (i.e. treating individuals facing addiction to prevent overdose deaths, health complications, or transitions to injection drug use) have generally focused on addiction treatment, including residential treatment programs and the use of rehabilitative pharmacotherapies like methadone or naltrexone, as well as harm reduction strategies such as the use of naloxone (i.e. Narcan) during acute overdoses to prevent death.

Much of what is known about the opioid epidemic has been informed by the experiences of countries like the United States. In low- and middle-income countries, however, where access to life-saving drugs and medications for pain relief are limited, issues around opioid use are quite different. While over-prescription and overuse are pervasive problems in the U.S., in other parts of the world, access to pain relief medications is limited by availability and cost, leading many to receive little to no palliative care in the face of painful, life-threatening illnesses. Despite this stark juxtaposition of experiences and the influence high-income countries have on the health infrastructures globally, the current U.S.-based epidemic is rarely considered within a broader global landscape.

Learning Goals

1. To define the contrasting ways opioid use is perceived in U.S. and global settings, and identify key drivers at the individual, medical, and societal levels.
2. To assess potential implications of current responses to the opioid epidemic in the United States through a global lens by considering varying perspectives of different key stakeholders.
3. To use existing evidence to hypothesize potential consequences current strategies may have on vulnerable populations in low-resource settings.

Procedure

Warm-Up Activity
(10 Minutes)

Start class with a warm-up activity to get the students to think about what they have learned about the opioid epidemic outside of this assignment using the prompts below. This activity is intended to set the stage for the comparative discussion that will be the focus of the class by demonstrating how students’ pre-existing perceptions about the opioid crisis were very likely shaped by a predominantly American lens. This exercise is also designed to get students thinking beyond the limits of their preconceptions and to consider all relevant actors influencing or being influenced by the epidemic.
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Sample Script and Questions

Today, we will spend our time discussing opioid addiction and the potential consequences of response efforts. Before we dive into our group activity, we will brainstorm together for a few minutes to get a sense of what our group baseline understanding is of this issue, particularly in light of what we may have heard through the media, or even through our own personal interactions with folks battling addiction.

Write the phrase “opioid epidemic” in the center of the board.

When you hear the term “opioid epidemic” what comes to mind? What sources of information have informed your perceptions?

As students share out their observations, jot notes on the board, grouping ideas together that are conceptually related. Remember, this activity is intended to be student-driven, so try to be a passive listener and note-taker rather than an active participant. If necessary, encourage students to elaborate on their points, but do not steer the conversation in any particular direction.

What do you notice about our general ideas about the opioid epidemic before coming into class today? Do you see any obvious trends? Are there any gaps of knowledge or perspectives not represented here?

The purpose of this warm-up activity is to provide the class with a concrete reference point to assess their learning over the course of the rest of the lesson. If there are specific points that emerge during the subsequent discussions that relate back to these initial impressions, point them out and briefly mention how they may support or refute what was initially brainstormed.

Group Activity: Key Stakeholder Role Play
(20 Minutes)

For this activity, students will be divided into five groups. Each group will be assigned one of the following key stakeholders, whose position towards opioid use and addiction they will be considering. In advance of this lesson, students should have read the assigned reading by Kolodny and colleagues briefly summarizing the history, determinants, and responses to opioid epidemic in the U.S., and should feel comfortable discussing these in their groups.

1. Advocates for the Reform of Prescription Opioids, an organization comprised of “bereaved parents, children, siblings and spouses, families of those suffering through an addiction, pain patients, doctors, and citizen advocates working towards more balanced care for patients who suffer from chronic pain, without causing harm to them and the general public.” (http://www.rxreform.org)
2. Purdue Pharma, the U.S.-based makers of OxyContin with a global reach in more than 30 countries around the world. For more information about Purdue’s stance on the opioid epidemic, see: Opioids & Corporate Responsibility.
3. The Indian Medical Association (IMA), an organization of physicians in India that makes recommendations for clinical practice based, in part, on evidence from public health authorities, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States. In 2016, the IMA endorsed the CDC’s recommendations for opioid prescription, supporting the assessment that, “for
the vast majority of patients, the known serious and too-often fatal risks [of opioid use] far outweigh the unproven and transient benefits.”  (Frieden & Houry, 2016)

4. **A hypothetical patient advocacy group in India** working to protect and advance patients’ rights, particularly among underserved populations (e.g. those living in rural communities and the urban poor) with limited access to consistent, high-quality healthcare.

5. **A hypothetical new World Health Organization task force on palliative care** aimed at increasing access to pain relief medications in low- and middle-income countries.

Within their groups, students should consider the following questions:

- **What constituency is your stakeholder representing?**
- **From this constituency’s perspective, what is the core health problem they identify in relation to opioids?** Alternatively stated, how does this group see opioids impacting population health? Summarize their stance in one sentence.
- **What does this constituency perceive as the key drivers or determinants of opioid over/under use?** Use the following table to organize your main points, and be sure to describe how the determinant influences the angle of opioid over/under use you are interested in as specifically as possible:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Detailed Description of Determinant</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Societal</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Multinational industries or organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Global influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Settings</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Physician's prescribing practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Medical professionals’ knowledge of the risks and benefits of opioid use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Health conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal attitudes towards opioids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Based on the table above, what are potential responses this constituency would support to address the opioid issue in their setting?**
- Next, recall the strategies discussed in the Kolodny article that are currently being implemented in the United States to stem the tide of opioid addiction. **Focusing particularly on the issue of greater regulation of the pharmaceutical industry and efforts targeting physicians,** how would your constituency respond to these recommendations? What would they perceive as potential advantages and disadvantages? Complete the following table to summarize your group’s key points:
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased regulation of the pharmaceutical industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing physician education of the risks associated with opioid (over)prescription</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing limitations on physicians' prescribing practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Class Discussion**

(30 Minutes)

Each group should designate one member to report the key points from their discussion. Before having students report out, the instructor should emphasize that the goal of this exercise is to understand that the way we define an issue may vary depending on the perspective we adopt.

Going around the room, each group should summarize the following points to the class in 2-3 minutes:

1. What group were they assigned to, and what core constituency does their stakeholder represent?
2. How do issues related to opioid use impact that constituency?
3. What is the stakeholder’s stance regarding restricting opioid access/prescriptions and why?

Encourage students who are not presenting to think about how their group’s discussion may align or diverge from other stakeholders’ views.

After each group has summarized their discussion for the class, the instructor should facilitate a conversation around advantages and disadvantages related to current U.S.-based strategies to address the opioid epidemic. To help students synthesize key points, consider writing a list of pros and cons on the board, focusing particularly on the impact they may have on patients globally as well as in the U.S.

In the last 5-10 minutes of class, pose the following open question: **In light of the complex issues we discussed today, what do you think is our best path forward?** Remind students that there is no right or wrong answer to this question, but it is rather designed to give them an opportunity to form an educated opinion based on their understanding of the issue and potential consequences for different populations.

**Summary**

The purpose of this lesson plan is to highlight that while the opioid epidemic is portrayed monolithically as an issue of addiction in the U.S., it takes on a very different form in the global context. Students should be
challenged to think about the global influence the United States holds—both with respect to medical practice and the pharmaceutical industry—and consider the intended and unintended consequences that responses in the U.S. context may have on palliative care practices around the world. By analyzing the issue of opioid over/under use, its determinants, and potential responses advocated by varying stakeholders, students should leave this lesson with a nuanced understanding of the complexities underpinning the opioid epidemic.