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Here's How Changes To OxyContin Led To Increased Heroin Deaths

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April 10, 2018

Making the opioid painkiller OxyContin harder to abuse led to more heroin deaths, a recent University of Notre Dame study found.

Purdue Pharma – the pharmaceutical manufacturer that created OxyContin and is widely blamed for igniting the opioid epidemic – reformulated the painkiller in 2010 to make it harder to snort or inject. Opioid addicts consequently turned to heroin, according to the study, Notre Dame News reported Monday.

“Although the abuse-deterrent formulation for OxyContin reduced prescription opioid mortality, the movement to heroin as a result of the reformulation meant there was a one-for-one substitution of heroin deaths for opioid deaths,” William N. Evans, one of the Notre Dame professors who co-authored the study, told Notre Dame News.

The study found that prescription opioid use stopped increasing in August 2010, but heroin overdose deaths subsequently rose the next month.

“A key component of the federal government’s response to the opioid epidemic has been encouraging the development of abuse-deterrent formulations of drug,” Evans said. “Our work suggests that as long as there are readily available substitutes for prescription opioids, such as heroin, reformulating painkillers will do little to mitigate the effect of the crisis.”

The Cato Institute similarly found that so-called abuse-deterrent formulations of OxyContin and other opioids led addicts to switch to heroin. That study, too, found there was a “one-for-one substitution of heroin deaths for opioid deaths.”

Reformulated opioids even led to an HIV outbreak in one Indiana county due to addicts who switched from painkillers to heroin sharing needles, the Cato study found.

Hundreds of state and local governments have filed lawsuits against Purdue Pharma and others for their role in causing the opioid epidemic. Through an aggressive and deceitful marketing campaign and propaganda, Purdue effectively reversed doctors reluctance to prescribe opioids over their fear of the drug’s addictiveness, a previous Daily Caller News Foundation investigation found.

Purdue Pharma and three top executives paid nearly \$635 million dollars after a federal court found they underplayed opioids' addictiveness when marketing the drug to doctors.

Unlike other pharmaceutical manufacturers, Purdue is privately owned. The company's OxyContin sales helped its owners, the Sacklers, build a \$13 billion net worth, making them among America's richest families.

The family has never publicly donated to addiction rehab facilities and are known as generous philanthropists, TheDCNF previously found.

"It is unfortunate and tragic that reformulating an opioid pain medication that was being abused may have led some of the individuals abusing that medication to abuse alternative substances, including heroin," a Purdue spokesman told TheDCNF.

He noted that a 2016 study that federal officials authored showed that less than four percent of opioid abusers progress to heroin and that government data shows heroin began increasing three years before OxyContin's reformulation due to the illicit drug's inexpensiveness and accessibility.

"Opioids with abuse-deterrent properties are not by themselves a solution – they make abuse more difficult but they are not abuse-proof and they don't prevent addiction," the spokesman said. "Continuing to expand access to opioids with abuse-deterrent properties is one component of the [Food and Drug Administration] Opioids Action Plan, but their potential cannot be fully realized until more prescription opioids are converted to abuse-deterrent formulations."