

Jones: Some Americans have dirty hands in the substance abuse business

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We have certainly seen lots of scary campaign ads with ominous music and frightening visuals showing border crossers carrying packages of fentanyl and other drugs to sell to our children. Most of the illicit fentanyl does come from foreign suppliers and a small amount is carried across the border by unauthorized border crossers. But the libertarian Cato Institute says that “fentanyl is overwhelmingly smuggled by U.S. citizens.” Statistics assembled by Cato show that about 90% of fentanyl seizures occur at regular border crossings, being transported in the vehicles of U.S. citizens.

That makes sense because fentanyl is dynamite in a small package. It can easily be concealed in small compartments of the tens of thousands of vehicles that travel back and forth across the southern U.S. border every day. Unauthorized border crossers are subjected to much greater scrutiny than the American vehicles. The campaign ads would not be nearly as effective if they were to point out that the greatest amount of fentanyl and other dangerous drugs is being imported by their fellow Americans, rather than folks fleeing political repression and violence in their home countries. We could use a bit of truth in advertising in this instance.

But there is even broader involvement of Americans in our country’s huge substance abuse problem. The opioid epidemic was stoked by the greed of drug makers to maximize profits. When I was Idaho Attorney General in the late 1980s, it was known that hydrocodone and oxycodone were effective pain relievers, but highly addictive. At that time, the use of these opioids was generally limited to severe pain cases because of their addictive properties. However, in the 1990s some drug companies saw gold in them thar hills and started aggressively marketing opioids, such as Purdue Pharma’s OxyContin, as a general remedy for pain. Endo Pharmaceuticals, Johnson & Johnson and others joined in to peddle their opioids for wide use.

Advertisements in reputable medical journals hyped the use of opioid products as safe and effective pain relievers. Pharmaceutical companies promoted the widespread use of opioids. Attractive drug representatives assured doctors there was no need to be concerned that patients would become addicted to opioids. Substantial campaign contributions to members of Congress were instrumental in smoothing the way for marketing these addictive painkillers without regulatory interference.

The drug companies obviously knew that these products were addictive and that many people who used them would become hooked, but the bright side was massive profits. The chances of

being criminally prosecuted were remote, so they went full steam ahead. All of that misconduct has played into the dire situation facing the country now.

So, while it is likely good politics to place the entire blame on folks who are either fleeing violence in their home country or just looking for a better life, or both, America needs to look in the mirror because some of us have played a large role in the drug tragedy. Every immigrant trying to enter this country could be turned away and it would hardly make a dent in the problem.

In addition to going after illicit foreign drug cartels, we also need to focus on Americans who legally traffic in dangerous substances. Peddlers of legal substances, such as tobacco, opioid and vaping companies, endanger the health and lives of Idahoans as much or more than criminals. We can do our part in Idaho by following the example set by Attorney General Lawrence Wasden. His office has collected more than \$564 million for the state just from the tobacco companies since 1998 and over \$200 million more from makers of other dangerous products, including opioid and vaping companies.

Almost all of those recoveries were made in multi-state legal actions brought by state attorneys general against the huge corporate substance peddlers. One of the candidates running to replace Wasden has pledged to vigorously pursue that kind of work, while the other said in the candidate debate that he would not. It would be well for Idahoans to do a little study and support the candidate who wants to tackle the problem.