

Editorial: We need a new approach to opioid crisis

August 10, 2017

President Trump's approach to the opioid crisis is a pain-inducing amalgam of things that have already been tried. We need a new approach, and it should begin by rethinking the failed war on drugs.

Trump is correct, though, that opioid abuse is "a tremendous problem in our country." Drug overdose is now the No. 1 cause of accidental death.

But declaring something is a problem is easier than prescribing a workable solution.

"The best way to prevent drug addiction and overdose is to prevent people from abusing drugs in the first place," Trump said on Tuesday. "If they don't start, they won't have a problem. If they do start, it's awfully tough to get off. So if we can keep them from going on and maybe by talking to youth and telling them: No good, really bad for you in every way. But if they don't start, it will never be a problem."

Somewhere in that linguistic labyrinth, there's an echo of the "Just Say No" campaign. Those are the words First Lady Nancy Reagan said to a little girl in 1982, when the little girl asked what she should say if anyone offered her drugs. That simplistic response became the basis for a drug prevention movement in the 1980s - Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE).

Yet DARE is a failed model. As Scientific American reports, "data indicate that the program does little or nothing to combat substance use in youth. A meta-analysis (mathematical review) in 2009 of 20 controlled studies by statisticians Wei Pan, then at the University of Cincinnati, and Haiyan Bai of the University of Central Florida revealed that teens enrolled in the program were just as likely to use drugs as were those who received no intervention."

Next, Trump proposes cracking down on heroin dealers.

"Opioid overdose deaths have nearly quadrupled since 1999," Trump said. "It's a problem, the likes of which we have never seen. Meanwhile the overall drug prosecutions have gone down in recent years. At the end of 2016, there were 23 percent fewer federal prosecutions than in 2011, so they looked at this surge and they let it go by. We're not letting it go by."

That's valid, but it's incomplete.

"Taking increased action against heroin dealers is an admirable goal," writes Andrew Egger for the Weekly Standard. "But more than 80 percent of America's opioid addicts are abusing prescription opioids, most of which were originally legally prescribed. Who do you prosecute when a kid sneaks the pain pills a doctor gave his mom?"

Trump's approach to the opioid crisis is right in one important aspect, however. He's not declaring it a "national public health emergency," though some are calling for him to do so.

As Jeffrey Singer of the Cato Institute points out, that designation “only fosters an air of panic, which all-too-often leads to hastily conceived policy decisions that are not evidence-based, and have deleterious unintended consequences.”

We need a calm, reasoned discussion about drugs - not platitudes, and not panic.