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310 million pain pills supplied to county; Data released as part of drug company lawsuits

More than 310 million prescription oxycodone and hydrocodone pain pills were supplied to Milwaukee County pharmacies between 2006 and 2012, according to data from the Drug Enforcement Administration analyzed by the Washington Post.

That's enough for 47 pills per person, every year.

In those seven years, 1.28 billion oxycodone and hydrocodone pain pills were supplied statewide, far more than the 842 million in neighboring Minnesota, which has a similar population.

And across the country, drug companies distributed 76 billion of the pills over that time.

Today, communities continue to grapple with the soaring addiction and overdoses that have defined the opioid epidemic that began in the 1990s with increased prescribing of opioids and deaths to the prescription pills. The next two waves of the epidemic came in the form of fatal overdoses to heroin and then to synthetic opioids, namely fentanyl.

"Have we seen the worst of the epidemic in southeastern Wisconsin?" Milwaukee County Corporation Counsel Margaret Daun asked. "We don't know."

The toll isn't measured solely in overdose deaths.

"You have people suffering from severe addictions over long periods of time, you have families that then suffer because of that and need additional social services," Daun said. "You have the diversion of resources that would be used for other public programming into addiction resources focused only on opioids."

The data, which show the path of every opioid pain pill sold in the country, was released publicly for the first time as part of a multi-district federal lawsuit against companies in the drug industry. Milwaukee County is a plaintiff in that lawsuit, in which a tentative settlement with OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma was reportedly reached Wednesday.

Michael Vann of the Milwaukee City-County Heroin, Opioid and Cocaine Task Force advocated for using any settlement money to help families instead of solely the people with substance abuse disorders. Children can be devastated by a family member's addiction, and families that don't get help can sometimes hinder the progress of the person trying to recover, he said.

'Immense' pain and suffering

On a pills-per-person measure, Milwaukee County was among the top Wisconsin counties. Others included Columbia County, just north of Dane County, where that figure was about 50 pills per resident per year. In Oneida County, in the northern part of the state, enough pills were received by pharmacies in the county to amount to 49 pills per person per year, according to the Washington Post analysis.

"You can also see why so many citizens in our state and our community got addicted," said Milwaukee Ald. Michael Murphy, who has spearheaded efforts to combat the opioid epidemic. He said he was amazed at the vast number of pills supplied to pharmacies in the county in that time period, calling it "numbing."
The reality is likely even starker considering how the pill-per-person ratio increases when the millions of pills supplied to pharmacies are divided solely among people who actually use opioids as opposed to the total population, said Matthew Hearing, Marquette University assistant professor of biomedical sciences.

"That makes that number skyrocket per person," said Hearing, who studies the neuroscience of addiction.

The pharmacies that received those pills could have supplied them to patients who don't live in Milwaukee County. It's also unknown how many of those pills were diverted to the black market.

In a local case, federal agents raided one of Milwaukee's largest pain clinics. They suspect Milwaukee Pain Treatment Center of being a "pill mill" in which controlled prescription drugs were prescribed inappropriately, according to a redacted affidavit from a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration investigator. The owners denied any illegal activity.

In the early 2000s, the number of homicides in Milwaukee County was comparable to the number of overdose deaths. Today, there are far more overdoses than homicides, a shift that is attributable to opioids, particularly fentanyl and heroin. Milwaukee County could be on pace to exceed 400 overdose deaths this year. Homicides in the city are trending below 2018, a year that closed with 100 killings.

Murphy said any money recouped in settlements can't compare with the damage done to people's lives and to the economy.

"You think of the cost to society of the pain and suffering people have gone through - it's immense," he said.

In Milwaukee County, Walgreens was the top distributor of the pills, and had three of the top five pharmacies in the county in terms of the number of pills received between 2006 and 2012.

In a statement, spokesman Phil Caruso called the company's pharmacists "highly trained professionals committed to dispensing legitimate prescriptions that meet the needs of our patients."

"Walgreens has been an industry leader in combating this crisis in the communities where our pharmacists live and work," Caruso wrote.

County party to federal lawsuit; city to pursue claim

Milwaukee County is one of the national settlement class representatives in the federal lawsuit, a critical designation that gives the county a lead role in trying to structure a national settlement, said Daun, the county's corporation counsel.

Among the defendants is Purdue Pharma. The company and the Sackler family that owns it reportedly offered a settlement of $10 billion to $12 billion to resolve thousands of lawsuits at the federal and state levels. On Wednesday, news broke that a tentative settlement had been reached.

Daun said Milwaukee County's claims in the federal lawsuit were bolstered by an Oklahoma judge's order in a separate case that Johnson & Johnson pay the State of Oklahoma $572 million for the company's role in the opioid crisis.

A Johnson & Johnson attorney told reporters after the ruling that the company was sympathetic toward people struggling with substance abuse but also said the judge's decision was "flawed," according to USA TODAY.

Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele said in a statement that the pharmaceutical industry and medical professionals prioritized profits over public well being for years and would be held accountable.
"Information in the DEA database confirms what we have known to be true: that the oversupply of highly potent painkillers by the medical community led to a dramatic rise in drug addiction and overdose in Milwaukee County and in communities across the nation," he said.

A 2012 Journal Sentinel/MedPage Today investigation found that a significant rise in narcotic painkiller prescriptions was fueled by a network of pain organizations, doctors and researchers that advocated for increasing the drugs’ use all while receiving millions of dollars from businesses that made them.

This year, Wisconsin also sued Purdue Pharma and Richard Sackler claiming they used deceptive marketing.

The City of Milwaukee is also exploring its options. The city attorney's office is authorized to sue drugmakers, distributors and others responsible for damages the city has suffered in the epidemic. The city will pursue whatever claim can be made, Deputy City Attorney Miriam Horwitz said.

"It's not a question of whether we're going to do something, it's a question of what we're going to do," she said.

Contact Alison Dirr at 414-224-2383 or adirr@jrn.com Follow her on Twitter @AlisonDirr.

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