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Rep. Pat Tiberi: Opioid epidemic calls for preventative efforts

From our nation's porous borders to our emergency rooms and doctors' offices, the opioid epidemic is among the most complex and multifaceted crises of our time. It is plaguing every community, leaving in its wake devastated families, broken dreams and economic ruin.

In Franklin County, one person dies every day from an opioid overdose. Nationwide more than 1,000 Americans per day are treated in emergency rooms for misusing prescription painkillers. Even worse, our nation's emergency responders and coroners are increasingly being overwhelmed by overdoses caused by heroin laced by very potent synthetic drugs such as carfentanil and fentanyl.

Late last year, Congress came together in a bipartisan fashion, committing more than \$1 billion in funding to ensure that more Americans are receiving the type of treatment and prevention tools they need. In March, the Trump administration also created a high-level commission that is focusing on opioid addiction and how federal resources are being spent on this public health crisis.

These are important steps, and support for treatment programs is vital to help and save Americans currently suffering from addiction. However, we must also equally and aggressively focus on the supply and demand side of illegal drugs by keeping them out of our communities and reducing the number of addictive opioids that are being prescribed.

For example, drug traffickers in countries like China are utilizing a loophole in our own postal system to ship synthetic opioids and other counterfeit drugs across our borders. This loophole is unique to the U.S. Postal Service because private carriers such as FedEx and UPS already require packages originating in foreign countries to list who sent it, who is receiving it and what is in it so they can better recognize counterfeit packages. Earlier this year, Sen. Rob Portman and I introduced legislation called the STOP Act to require the postal service to also collect the same level of information so that U.S. Customs can identify and stop dangerous drugs from ending up in the hands of dealers in the United States.

Within our borders, we should also address the demand side by combating the opioid epidemic with preventative efforts that keep people from becoming addicted to opioids in the first place.

Opioids are currently the standard for effectiveness in treating the roughly 100 million Americans who are suffering from chronic pain. For many, acute use after painful surgery or treatment can lead to dependence and addiction. Recent studies have shown that 1 in 10 patients say they've become dependent on opioids after taking these medicines following an operation.

But, what if we could develop alternatives capable of eliminating pain without addictive side effects?

Today, there are small, emerging biotechnology companies and established enterprises working hard to transform the standard of care for pain management through nonaddictive, next-generation therapies.

For example, one company is developing new therapies that target the body's nervous system to treat pain without inducing addictive side effects. Others are developing non-opioid products for pain control and partnering with large hospital chains to develop alternative, non-opioid approaches for pain management. Other companies have developed innovative products designed to prevent relapses into addiction.

Let's face it, America's most innovative ideas rarely originate inside the walls of Washington's bureaucratic buildings. Like with the STOP Act, our best chance to overcome this epidemic and to save lives is to harness the ingenuity and effectiveness of the private sector.

Federal funding is important but it's just one component to fight addiction. Congress and the President's Commission should foster innovation by bolstering efforts between the private sector, providers on the ground and communities to find the real cure. That is where we can find the hope and the real solutions we need to spare our future generations from the brutal hold of this national crisis.

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