

Pain and No Gain

By Reg P. Wydeven
April 13, 2014

A few years ago, I took an elbow to the face during a basketball game and broke my nose. Badly. My nose was so crooked I could practically smell my ear.

I had to see an ear, nose and throat specialist to fix it. In the modern, technological world we live in, I was curious to see how he was going to straighten my schnoz. He reached into a drawer that I assumed was full of high-tech gadgets and instead pulled out a metal rod. He proceeded to shove the rod up my nostril and crank my nose back until it was straight.

A few weeks later, my doctor operated on my nose to straighten it some more and to fix my deviated septum. I was lucky to have a great doctor and he did an awesome job. But it hurt. A lot. To help, my doctor prescribed Vicodin for the pain.

I was miserable for a few days with something as minor as a busted nose. Unfortunately, some people deal with real pain every day. Even more unfortunate, there are very few options for alleviating chronic severe pain.

Because I have a very important person in my life who endures excruciating pain, I was excited last October when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Zohydro, an extended-release powerful painkiller. It became available on the market last month.

Zohydro is a type of opiate, such as morphine or oxycodone, the main ingredient in the painkiller OxyContin. The painkilling property of opiates comes from hydrocodone. Vicodin, another popular painkiller, contains hydrocodone coupled with acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol. Zohydro contains five times the amount of hydrocodone that was previously available in pills.

That's why Zohydro has come under a tremendous amount of fire recently, for the painkiller's blessing is also its curse. Legislators fear that Zohydro will be abused, like heroin, another opiate. That's why government officials across the country are taking steps to get Zohydro off the shelves.

Several states' governors implemented measures to make it more difficult for doctors to prescribe Zohydro. Massachusetts even ordered an outright ban on the drug until it is sold in a form that is more difficult to abuse.

The backlash results from the fact that drug addicts can crush the capsules, effectively negating their slow-release properties. Once crushed, Zohydro can be snorted or injected for an immediate and extremely powerful, and sometimes lethal, high.

According to a report released by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration last year, more than 4.5 million Americans abuse prescription pain relievers, which is the country's fastest-growing drug problem. Prescription painkillers often act as gateway drugs to more dangerous narcotics, such as heroin.

For these reasons, an FDA advisory committee recommended by an 11-2 vote to not approve Zohydro, but the agency approved it anyway. At the end of 2013, attorneys general from 28 states signed a letter requesting the FDA to revoke its approval or require Zogenix, the drug's manufacturer, to reformulate it to make it harder to crush. Wisconsin's AG did not participate.

Hopefully Zogenix can develop a crush-proof capsule so people who suffer from chronic pain can get the help they need while avoiding a greater drug epidemic.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2014 McCarty Law LLP. All rights reserved.