

First, Do No Harm

By Reg P. Wydeven
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While we were fortunate to have a pretty mild winter, spring has not been ideal. And although I've been suffering from some serious hay fever, it's also been cold and rainy. Usually it's one or the other, but this year has been a double whammy.

My allergies have been so bad this year that a few mornings I've woken up with my eyes matted shut. While this has provided Three Stooges-like entertainment for my family, I am not amused.

Thank goodness for medicine. Every morning I shoot medicine up my nose and take a small pill. While I still suffer, I don't even want to think about what bad shape I would be in without my allergy medication. In fact, my whole family doses up first thing in the morning. Thankfully, we are still under our Kleenex budget.

This year alone my family has taken medicines to help with allergies, fevers, strep throat, the flu and asthma. My wife and son carry epinephrine pens with them that literally are life-savers. While medicines definitely can save lives, they can also be used to take them.

Thirty-one states still have capital punishment. When carrying out death sentences, almost all of them utilize lethal injections. And those valuable medicines that can heal, if mixed properly, also are used in these lethal injections.

But pharmaceutical juggernaut Pfizer recently announced that it was banning the use of its drugs for lethal injections. A statement issued by the company explained that, "Pfizer makes its products to enhance and save the lives of the patients we serve. Consistent with these values, Pfizer strongly objects to the use of its products as lethal injections for capital punishment."

According to Reprieve, a human rights organization based in New York that opposes the death penalty, Pfizer is the last of approximately 25 FDA-approved international companies that are able to manufacture drugs used in executions to now block the use of their drugs in executions. Reprieve Director Maya Foia said that "Pfizer's actions cement the pharmaceutical industry's opposition to the misuse of medicines."

The impact of this ban is that many states have had to delay executions while looking for an alternative to lethal injections. For example, Ohio has not executed an inmate for over two years. However, the state has more than two dozen inmates with firm execution dates, but they are being put on hold until medications for injections have been obtained.

Some states are still using lethal injections, but are not disclosing who made the medicine being used. Consumers have filed lawsuits in Texas, Georgia, Arkansas and Missouri, asking courts to force states to identify their drug providers.

Other states, however, are taking matters into their own hands. Tired of waiting for medicine for lethal injections, Virginia passed a bill this spring allowing the use of the electric chair. Two years ago, Tennessee passed a similar law.

If drugs aren't available in Utah, a 2015 law approved the use of firing squads for executions. Oklahoma became the first state to approve nitrogen gas for executions if drugs aren't available. The Attorney General for Mississippi wants to be able to use electrocution, firing squads and nitrogen gas.

As more and more states abolish the death penalty (7 since 2007), the problem may someday resolve itself.

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