



## Bob's Pharmacy Relies on Naloxone

*Independents, Like This Fictional One, Have Found the Silver Bullet as They Help Fight the Opioid Overdose Crisis*

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### AUTHOR BIO

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THE DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION determined some years ago that heroin and prescription drug overdoses have overtaken auto accidents and firearms as the leading cause of deaths due to injury.

Overdose deaths in the United States rose to 72,000 in 2017 from 66,000 in 2016. Since 1996, 200,000 people have died of prescription drug overdoses. The opioid antagonist naloxone stands on the front lines of the battle against the opioid epidemic. Emergency medical technicians and hospital personnel have long relied on naloxone to treat opioid overdoses. Now it is available to drug users and their family members.

### COPING WITH THE CRISIS

*Bob, a congenial and conscientious neighborhood pharmacist, is the proprietor of Bob's Pharmacy in Small Town, USA. His wife, Sally, also a pharmacist, helps him serve their community as reliable health care providers. Their good advice over the years has reinforced their strong reputation. Bob's Pharmacy, like other pharmacies, is coping with the opioid epidemic.*

*One day, a well-dressed middle-aged woman visits Bob's Pharmacy. She browses the aisles before approaching Bob at the pharmacy counter.*

*"Do you have naloxone?" she asks nervously.*

*Bob quickly understands her dilemma and seeks to assist her. She does not appear to be an opioid user. Bob surmises that she is probably asking for naloxone because a family member or a friend is suffering from an opioid addiction.*

Real-life Surgeon General Jerome Adams, who also has a family member who suffers from opioid use disorder, is vigorously addressing this epidemic. His plan consists of normalizing the use of naloxone, teaching Americans that substance abuse is a disease that merits compassion, and preventing opioid use.

"You come across a person in the street bleeding—you've got to put a tourniquet on them to stop the bleeding before you can get them into surgery. Naloxone is that tourniquet for someone who's suffering from an overdose," Adams said in an interview with Mediaplanet.<sup>1</sup>

"It allows us to get them into a more definitive and long-term treatment," he said.

On October 3, 2018, the Senate overwhelmingly passed the SUPPORT (Substance Use-Disorder Prevention That Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment) for Patients and Communities Act after it won House approval on September 28, 2018.<sup>2,3</sup> President Donald J. Trump signed the bill into law on October 24, 2018. This legislation is intended to fight the opioid epidemic through research, treatment, and aid to families affected by it. The provisions include, among others, ones on clinical guidelines, continuing education, non-narcotic alternatives, prescribing limits, and prescription drug monitoring programs.

### LEGAL ASPECTS

In the majority of states, it is now legal to make naloxone available through a standing order at a pharmacy. State laws supporting naloxone access generally fall into 3 categories:

- Collaborative practice agreements, which

allow pharmacists to prescribe naloxone to at-risk individuals. The collaborative practice agreement may be conducted with either individual physicians or on a statewide basis.

- **Good Samaritan laws**, which offer protection to individuals responding at the scene of an overdose from being arrested for possession of a controlled substance.
- **Liability protection/third-party administration**, which protects the prescriber as well as the person who administers the naloxone. It also allows naloxone prescriptions to be given to bystanders for use on victims of opioid overdose.

### NALOXONE: HOW IT WORKS

Naloxone is often sold under the brand name Narcan. It is thought to be a silver bullet in the opioid crisis, in which more than 2 million Americans have become addicted. Someone in the United States dies of an opioid overdose every 20 minutes.

Naloxone reverses the effects of an overdose by inhibiting opioids from affecting parts of the brain receptive to opioids for 30 to 90 minutes. It keeps the autonomous body functions working and thus prevents respiratory depression that typically leads to death from an overdose.

### AVAILABILITY OF NALOXONE

Naloxone for take-home use is available as an injectable and as a nasal spray. Both formulations rapidly reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. The nasal spray tends to be favored by caregivers and patients, but the injectable kit is more widely available in pharmacies. An auto-injector is now available and is easy to dispense, but it is more expensive than the other formulations.

### WIDER ACCESS

Federal funding has increased over the past few years to fight the opioid epidemic. Congress is also addressing the epidemic by dispensing opioids in limited amounts for 3- to-7-day periods, funding research for nonaddictive pain medication, and

increasing the ability of pharmacists to track opioid prescriptions (and to prevent diversion).

In addition, in March 2018, \$4.7 billion was earmarked for the effort, including \$1 billion in grants to states. The number of deaths due to overdoses declined slightly in December 2017 and January 2018, which suggests that concerted efforts to prevent opioid use are starting to take effect.

#### BUILDING TRUST

*"I need to know who is going to use the naloxone before I can fill the prescription," Bob says.*

*The customer hesitates. She is reluctant to reveal the necessary information for Bob to fill the prescription.*

*"Thanks anyway," she says, disheartened, as she starts to leave.*

*Bob is at the forefront of the opioid epidemic, where congressional legislation meets the end user. Winning the confidence and trust of patients is the uphill battle Bob has to fight before he can dispense the silver bullet.*

*"Wait a minute, ma'am! I think I can help you here...," Bob calls after her. ♦*

#### REFERENCES

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