

Epidemic of opioid abuse is top health story of 2017

December 28 2017, by E.j. Mundell, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—The millions of Americans caught in the grip of an

addiction to opioids—prescription painkillers or heroin—remained the leading health news story of the past year.

The scourge is now so widespread that, just last week, research suggested that deaths from opioid overdoses may be the biggest factor driving a decline in overall U.S. life expectancy.

If the trend holds, "we could have more than two years of declining life expectancy in a row, which we haven't seen since the influenza pandemic of 1918," said Bob Anderson, a statistician at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which recently released the 2016 data.

Overall, 63,600 Americans—many in young adulthood or middle age—died from an opioid overdose in 2016. That's higher than the 40,000 annual deaths lost to AIDS at the height of the 1990s HIV crisis.

The advent of extremely powerful opioids such as fentanyl is only compounding the problem, experts say. But a turnaround is possible.

"It's important to remember these deaths are preventable," said Lindsey Vuolo, associate director of health law and policy with the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

"If we start treating addiction the way we treat other diseases, with a health-based approach funded at a level commensurate with the size and scope of the problem, we will overcome this crisis," Vuolo told *HealthDay*.

In other health news, Trump administration efforts to repeal and replace the controversial health reform law known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—or "Obamacare"—also dominated headlines in 2017.

But holdouts from both the moderate and far right of the political

spectrum doomed such efforts in the House and Senate, despite repeated attempts from the White House to push legislation through.

However, just before Christmas Congress dealt a blow to the program, as the elimination of the ACA's so-called "individual mandate" became part of major tax reform. The individual mandate forced healthy-but-uninsured Americans to join ACA insurance pools or face a fine. Many experts believe the mandate is crucial to the financial health of Obamacare.

In other news, the exposure and disgrace of men such as movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, TV personalities Matt Lauer and Charlie Rose, and others in the world of entertainment and politics, brought the age-old scourge of sexual harassment in the workplace out from the shadows.

Legions of empowered female (and some male) victims joined the ranks of the #MeToo movement, perhaps hailing a turnaround in society's tolerance for these physically and mentally assaultive behaviors.

Medical science made strides in 2017, too, with the first three approvals of gene-based therapies by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. In August, the agency approved Kymriah, a treatment that tweaks an aberrant gene responsible for a form of the blood cancer acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

At the time, FDA Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb said the advent and approval of these life-saving therapies will "change the face of modern medicine and drug development. Gene therapy products are now being studied in many diseases and conditions, including genetic disorders, autoimmune diseases, heart disease, cancer, diabetes and HIV/AIDS."

Since then, two more gene therapies—one against a rare eye disease and another against a form of lymphoma—have received FDA approval.

Forget to take your meds? This year the FDA also approved the first of what could be many "digital pills"—medicines designed to alert patients and doctors if and when they have been taken.

Abilify MyCite, the newly approved drug, is meant for patients with schizophrenia and depression, where medication compliance is often key to successful treatment. The pill contains a sensor that can send messages to devices such as smartphones to relay information on whether or not it's been taken.

The rise of artificial intelligence—"AI"—in medicine also made waves this year. For example, one study found that smart computer algorithms actually outperformed pathologists at spotting tiny signs of cancer in lymph tissue taken from breast cancer patients. So, the world of "Dr. AI" is not far off, experts said, where computers and physicians work together to guide patient care.

And more Americans burdened by excess weight may need that care: In October, CDC statisticians reported that nearly 40 percent of U.S. adults are now obese, along with 18.5 percent of kids.

That's a steep rise from the 30.5 percent of adults and about 14 percent of children noted in 1999-2000 data, the agency said.

Vaccines made headlines—for good or bad—in 2017, as well.

In good news, the advent of Shingrix—a much more protective shingles vaccine—could be a boon for millions of U.S. seniors threatened by the nerve disorder.

But on the other hand, the flu shot for the 2016-2017 season was a decided flop, with just about 48 percent effectiveness. Flu experts worry that the vaccine for this season may be equally weak.

Copyright © 2017 [HealthDay](#). All rights reserved.

Citation: Epidemic of opioid abuse is top health story of 2017 (2017, December 28) retrieved 20 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-12-epidemic-opioid-abuse-health-story.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.