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HEALTH

Experts question study, but acknowledge rise in opioid abuse in N.C.

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Despite questioning the findings of an April study that said Wilmington has the highest rate of prescription opioid abuse in the nation, area health care experts are acknowledging that addiction and abuse are on the upswing.

The study, by Castlight Health, a San Francisco-based healthcare information company, gave Wilmington the dubious honor of [top abuser of prescribed opioids](#). The Port City was one of four North Carolina cities to make the list's top 25.

Health experts, however, including Eleanor Howell, director of the N.C. State Center for Health Statistics, and Joshua Swift, deputy health director at the New Hanover County Health Department, questioned the accuracy of the study.

Among their concerns were the study's limited scope -- it reflects only people with health benefits administered by Castlight, the study's publisher. Swift noted that the report focused exclusively on issued prescriptions, not actual usage, and several area health care centers hold routine drug collections because pills often go unconsumed.

Also, the experts said, the study's definition of abuse -- an individual without cancer and/or who wasn't receiving palliative care who received a greater than 90-day cumulative supply of opioids and who received an opioid prescription from four or more providers over a five-year period -- doesn't leave much room for bad luck. A person with a case of kidney stones one year, a dental surgery the next, maybe a workplace fall or car crash after that, could easily get lumped into the abuser category.

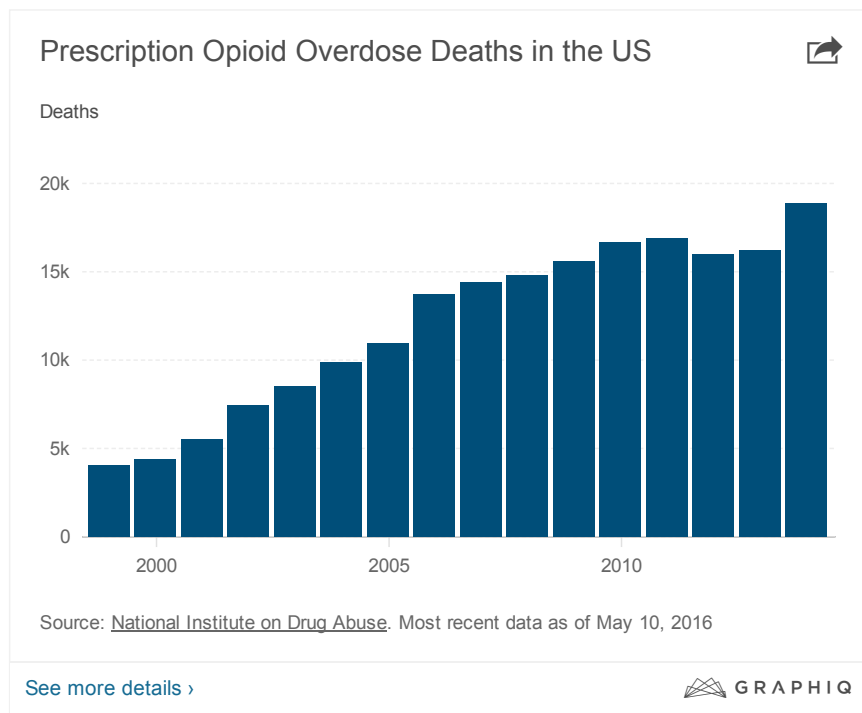
Quibbles over Wilmington's ranking aside, however, one thing the experts agree on is that opioid addiction and abuse are a huge problem.

"Drug overdoses are the leading cause of unintentional injury and death in the U.S.," Howell wrote in an email. "In North Carolina, drug poisoning deaths now outnumber motor vehicle deaths each year."



Castlight Health, a San Francisco-based health care information company, ranked Wilmington as the top city in America for opioid abuse.

Graphic courtesy of Castlight Health



Prescription Opioid Overdose Deaths in the US | HealthGrove

Medication or drug overdose deaths have increased by more than 300 percent in North Carolina since 1999, Howell said, while heroin deaths have increased by 554 percent from 2010 to 2014 in the state.

Dr. Nathan Strahl, a clinical associate at Duke University Medical Center who's also a homeowner in Carolina Beach, said he'd like to see the focus shift from the problem to its solution.

"There's so much written, seen and viewed about opioid addiction, but so little is written about the remedy," Strahl said. "There's very little information available about adequate treatment for the disorder. There are solutions and help available."

Strahl, 71, has spent decades in the field of addiction treatment. He argues that limits on the number of patients physicians can treat with the drug buprenorphine (commonly sold as Suboxone) need to be lifted. Doctors are currently held to a maximum of 100 patients they can treat with the medication, which neutralizes withdrawal symptoms and cravings.

Strahl said other helpful measures would include making mandatory the use of a database currently in place that tracks all controlled substance prescriptions -- that thing you sign when buying high-octane decongestants or cough syrup at the pharmacy. Doctors currently have access to the database to check if their patient has been shopping around for prescriptions, but its use is voluntary.

Christy Spivey, New Hanover Regional Medical Center's administrator for emergency services, said the hospital has measures in place to counteract opioid abuse. For one, NHRMC dictates that while a patient may see several specialists during his or her stay, the use of painkillers is overseen by a single physician. In many cases, opioids can be avoided altogether.

Despite the numbers -- Castlight's report says that, nationwide, 4 percent of the population is consuming more than 30 percent of the drugs -- Spivey said that prescribing opioids is done with caution.

"Physicians stay up to date with the drugs, what's current and what's the best application of them," Spivey said. "It takes careful assessment and consideration on

their part to figure that out."

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