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Forty million people (16% of our population) over the age of 12 in the U.S. have a relationship with a substance that qualifies as addiction. Fifteen million people struggle with abuse and addiction to prescription opioids. By the time of graduation, over 50% of high school students will have used an illicit substance or alcohol. Recreational and prescribed use of opioid pills is the most common pathway to heroin addiction. In 2012 there were 174 heroin related deaths in Connecticut. By 2015, that number had risen to 415. An adolescent who engages in regular use of alcohol or other mood altering substances before the age of 18 has a 1:10 chance of having a lifelong struggle with abuse and addiction.

While increasing the availability of treatment facilities and improving targeted law enforcement are essential goals, it has been suggested that due to the widespread availability of prescription opioids in America, along with a degree of cultural tolerance and ignorance of their potential effects, we will never treat or arrest our way out of this crisis. Education and prevention are the only realistic antidotes to the rising tide of opioid use and abuse. This approach demands that we become better doctors, informing patients of the addictive potential of these medications and prescribing much more carefully. It demands that we become better parents, more emotionally engaged with our children and aware of where they are, who they are with and what they are doing. It demands that we become more sensitive, skilled educators, spending time teaching students about the hazards of addictive substances and learning to recognize adolescents at risk. And it demands that those who profit so handsomely from the manufacture, distribution and sale of addictive medications play a responsible role in supporting efforts to minimize the breathtaking, lifetaking downstream effects of their products.

It has been observed that there is a decades-long tradition in the U.S., supported by our legal structure, that gives corporations the same rights as individuals with none of the responsibilities. Industrial polluters are largely successful in avoiding paying the environmental costs of their profit making. Only recently have auto makers been brought to task to make cars safer and less polluting, with the costs of those measures still being passed along to consumers. Manufacturers of tobacco products containing nicotine, perhaps the most addictive substance available in our culture, fought tooth and nail to avoid placing warnings on their products, long after the risks were well documented.

Now, the manufacturers and distributors of prescription opioids have the opportunity to distinguish themselves from other, irresponsible, high-profit industries, by devoting a portion of their billions of dollars of profits to education about the dangers of opioid use along with prevention and treatment of opioid dependency. We should encourage them to do this. We should require them to do this. It is the right thing to do and the fair thing to do. We all know it and so do they.

In 1950, half of the adults in America smoked cigarettes. Now, after recognizing the dangers of tobacco and developing a focused campaign of education and prevention, that number has fallen to about 15%. We can reverse the rising tide of suffering and death inflicted on our teens and young adults by prescription opioids. We have proven that this kind of project can succeed. But, realistically, it takes a lot more than good intentions. It takes hard work, cooperation, dedication, creativity and it takes money. So, while we all do our parts as individuals, families, educators and professional associations to reverse this tragic trend, we should expect the same from our corporate "citizens".