

**Committee:** Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee

**Issue:** Tackling the Opioid crisis

**Student Officer:** Antoniou Thaleia

**Position:** Co-Chair

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## PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear Delegates,

My name is Thaleia Antoniou, I am a junior attending the International Baccalaureate Diplomat Program in Anatolia College, Thessaloniki and I will be serving as one of the Co-Chairs of the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee.

Having been an active member in MUN, I consider it to be an excellent opportunity for students to engage in global issues and meet people from all around the world and make long-lasting friendships.

This year's agenda includes two very contemporary and extremely heated problems the world has to currently address and overcome. The topic this study guide will be dealing with is "Tackling the Opioid crisis," which is a rather crucial one and affects policies worldwide.

The purpose of the guide is to facilitate you with your research, by explaining the conflict, defining key terms, and laying out the foundations of the topic. You should not only rely on this but also conduct your own research as well as keep up with the news, as new information comes to light almost every single day and every snippet of it could be useful.

I understand that the topic is a rather complicated one! Should you have any questions don't hesitate to contact me at: [20097086@student.anatolia.edu.gr](mailto:20097086@student.anatolia.edu.gr).

I look forward to meeting you all!

Best wishes and stay safe,  
Thaleia Antoniou

## TOPIC INTRODUCTION

In 3400 BC, a flower was initially cultivated in lower Mesopotamia, an area that is currently named Southeast Asia. This flower was used for its ability to induce pleasure while also reducing pain. Today, the substance made from this plant is referred to as opium, which is the extract of the poppy seed. Although opium was first introduced as an effective painkiller, it also is the foundation of the opioid crisis today. Opioids are a group of medicaments that are derived from opium, and they include illicit drugs akin to heroin, as well as a group of legal prescription pain relievers like oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine, and fentanyl.

In today's society, the recurrent misuse of opioids is creating devastating effects on populations and is considered a major threat to the world. The opioid epidemic as a whole is characterised as the "overuse or misuse of addictive opioid drugs with significant medical, socioeconomic consequences."<sup>1</sup>

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

### Opium

"Opium is a narcotic drug that is obtained from the unripe seed pods of the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), a plant of the family *Papaveraceae*. Opium is obtained by slightly incising the seed capsules of the poppy after the plant's flower petals have fallen. Opium and the drugs obtained from it are called opiates."<sup>2</sup>

### Opiates

"Opiates, sometimes known as narcotics, are a type of drug that act as depressants on the Central Nervous System (CNS). Opiates come from opium, which can be produced naturally from poppy plants; opioids are chemically synthesized opiate-like drugs."<sup>3</sup>

### Epidemic

"Affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time."<sup>4</sup> In the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies reassured the medical community that patients would not become addicted to opioid pain relievers and healthcare providers began to prescribe them at greater rates. Increased prescription of opioid medications led to widespread misuse of both prescription and non-prescription opioids before it became clear that these medications could indeed be highly addictive. Devastating consequences of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Opioid Epidemic." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 June 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opioid\\_epidemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opioid_epidemic).

<sup>2</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Opium." Encyclopædia Britannica, December 21, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/science/opium>.

<sup>3</sup> Cherry, Kendra. "Why an Opiate's Impact on the Brain Can Cause Addiction." verywellmind, March, 23 2020, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-opiates-2795406>.

<sup>4</sup> "Epidemic." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epidemic](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epidemic).

opioid epidemic include increases in opioid misuse and related overdoses, as well as the rising incidence of newborns experiencing withdrawal syndrome due to opioid use and misuse during pregnancy.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Addiction**

“A compulsive, chronic, physiological or psychological need for a habit-forming substance, behaviour, or activity having harmful physical, psychological, or social effects and typically causing well-defined symptoms (such as anxiety, irritability, tremors, or nausea) upon withdrawal or abstinence.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Tramadol**

“Tramadol is an opioid pain medication used to treat moderate to moderately severe pain. When taken by mouth in an immediate-release formulation, the onset of pain relief usually begins within an hour. It is also available by injection.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Naloxone**

“Naloxone is a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdose. It is an opioid antagonist—meaning that it binds to opioid receptors and can reverse and block the effects of other opioids.”<sup>8</sup>

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Health Implications**

Once a person consumes opioids or abuses prescription drugs that contain opioids as active ingredients, the body will build a tolerance for these opioids over time. Thus, it is easier to become addicted to these substances, since the body constantly requires a larger dosage to feel the same soothing effects as it did with smaller dosages. Some symptoms of opioid addiction include uncontrollable cravings, drowsiness, weight loss, lack of hygiene, financial difficulties due to excessive money spent on opioids, and, finally, the inability to control opioid use. As a result of opioid addiction, basic bodily functions are severely altered, which jeopardises the individual’s health.

### **Social Implications**

Opioid painkiller prescriptions are becoming closely regulated, yet cases of addiction and opioid overdose are continuing to increase, especially among young people. This poses social implications, since young people that become addicted to these drugs may experience changes in mood and behaviour, which in turn will damage their relationships with others, including friends and family.

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<sup>5</sup> “About the Epidemic.” HHS.gov, <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “Addiction.” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/addiction](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/addiction).

<sup>7</sup> “Tramadol.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Jan. 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tramadol>.

<sup>8</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse. “Opioid Overdose Reversal with Naloxone (Narcan, Evzio).” National Institute on Drug Abuse, 9 Oct. 2020, [www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-overdose-reversal-naloxone-narcan-evzio](http://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-overdose-reversal-naloxone-narcan-evzio).

Apart from young people, there is a link between heavy opioid users and increased crime rates. Crime and drug use are interconnected as one influences the other. Therefore, the ongoing drug problem and opioid crisis may create more dangerous societies, and it should be advised that society's treatment of drug-using criminals needs to encompass both rehabilitation from drug use and the deterring of crime.

Not only this, but when opioid consumers, whether young or old, decide to receive treatment and quit consuming drugs, the withdrawal period may lead to intense symptoms, such as stomach aches, fevers, and vomiting. This may lead the former drug user to act in a violent or dangerous manner. This is a threat to society and serves as a social implication, since it endangers not only the individual, but also others surrounding the individual.

Overall, it is evident that overdosing on drugs or excessively consuming opioids affects inter-human relations. Drug use has been linked to an increase in interpersonal problems. Furthermore, it has been found that there is a shift in priorities when a person decides to ingest drugs, especially over a prolonged period of time. As a result, this restrains active drug users from engaging in and maintaining their social relationships, which can add a strain on their relationships, particularly among the individual and their parents, family, friends, or significant other.

### **Economic Implications**

The opioid crisis yields multiple tangible examples of economic devastation due to individuals misusing opioids or prescription drugs containing opioids. In the United States, the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) estimates that the opioid crisis cost the nation \$696 billion in 2018, representing 3.4% of the US gross domestic product (GDP). This immense figure measures the full cost of the crisis, by taking into consideration the value of lost lives, increases in healthcare costs, and reductions in productivity throughout the nation. Furthermore, the figure clearly illustrates the magnitude of this epidemic and the toll it has taken on the economy of one of the major nations involved.

### **Opium wars**

The Opium Wars were two armed conflicts between the forces of Western countries and the Chinese Qing Dynasty, which ruled China from 1644-1912. The first Opium War occurred in 1839-1842 and the second Opium War occurred in 1856-1860.

The Opium Wars emerged due to China's attempts to suppress the trade of opium. British foreign traders had been illegally exporting opium from India to China since the 18th century, and that trade grew dramatically from 1820. As a result, opioid addiction was widespread, and this caused social and economic disruption. After hostilities broke out, the war ended, resulting in the Treaty of Nanjing, which outlined the number of treaty ports where the British could trade and reside from.

During the second Opium War, negotiations led to the legalisation of opium trade in Shanghai.

### **Civil War and post-Civil War era**

During the United States Civil War, morphine was utilised as a battlefield anaesthetic. Furthermore, physicians prescribed opium gum, laudanum, or morphine to soldiers in order to ease the pain from gunshot wounds. As a result, a number of soldiers developed morphine dependency. Following the Civil War, American doctors began widely prescribing morphine. During this postwar period, morphine became a common way to consume opiates, since it was an efficient painkiller.

### **Opioid addiction in the modern era**

The opioid epidemic began when pharmaceutical companies in the United States began prescribing vast amounts of medication containing opioids in the 1990s. They falsely informed both the public and the medical community that the medications were safe and not addictive. Thus, opioids were prescribed at an alarming rate.

Several years later, the number of drug overdose deaths decreased by 4% from 2017 to 2018. However, the number of drug overdose deaths was still four times higher in 2018 than it was in 1999. In addition, nearly 70% of the 67,367 drug-related deaths in 2018 involved an opioid. From 1999-2018, almost 450,000 people died from an overdose involving any opioid. With these figures in mind, the rise in opioid overdose deaths can be clearly outlined in three distinct waves.

#### **Wave 1 (1990)**

In the first wave of the opioid epidemic, pharmaceutical companies in the United States extensively marketed opioid painkillers. Pharmaceutical companies were downplaying the addictive effects of opioids to both the public and to the medical community, which resulted in a spike of prescriptions. As a result, there was an increase in overdose deaths involving prescription opioids, which included natural and semi- synthetic opioids, as well as methadone.

#### **Wave 2 (2010)**

In the second wave of the opioid epidemic, there were rapid increases in overdose deaths involving heroin. Heroin is illegal and highly addictive, and nearly all people that abuse heroin also use at least 1 other drug. A heroin overdose can cause changes in breathing, and may result in a coma or even death. In the United States, more than 115,000 people died from heroin-related overdoses between 2010 and 2018.

#### **Wave 3 (2013)**

In the third wave of the opioid epidemic, there were significant increases in overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids, particularly illicitly manufactured fentanyl. Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine, meaning the risk of overdose when a user consumes fentanyl is significantly higher than when a user consumes morphine. Furthermore, most recent cases of fentanyl-related harm in the United States are directly linked to illicitly produced fentanyl.

## Effects on LEDCs

Referred to as “the other opioid crisis” by the United Nations, an epidemic featured in fewer headlines than its American counterpart, this crisis devastates LEDCs. In countries, including India, Africa and the Middle East, this abuse has created international havoc, and experts believe that the loophole in narcotics regulation and miscalculation of opioids and tramadol’s danger are to blame for these epidemics. Unlike other opioids, tramadol is not closely regulated, and, as a result, flows freely around the world, “unburdened by international controls that track most dangerous drugs.”

## MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

### United States of America (USA)

In 2017, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency, indicating that the magnitude of this crisis is larger than previously thought. Efforts were made by former President Donald J. Trump to bring the crisis to a halt, and examples include the implementation of the Safer Prescribing Plan, a plan aiming to make opioid prescriptions safer and thus decrease levels of prescription drug addiction.

### United Kingdom (UK)

Although the crisis in the UK is not as severe as that in the US, it is still referred to as an opioid epidemic. The harm of opioid over-prescription has been understood, and the government is making efforts to regulate opioid prescriptions. In order to tackle the issue, the Health Secretary has requested that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) explores the possibility of opioid medication to carry clear warnings on its packaging, indicating the addictive nature of the substance, similar to what is seen in cigarette packet labels.

### Mexico

Mexico is becoming a major transit and production destination for the fentanyl trade. Mexican traffickers appear to play an increasingly important role in distributing fentanyl across the US, inherently worsening the US opioid crisis. Since misuse of prescription opioids in Mexico is low, the government has not implemented any measures so as to tackle the issue of opioid addiction. As a result, other countries, such as the US, may suffer the repercussions of opioid production and trade in Mexico.

### India

India is one of the world’s top producers of opium for the legal global market. However, in India, cancer and terminal illnesses are on the rise, seeing as 1 million cases of cancer were diagnosed in 2014. Yet, patients in India are still denied access to pain relief, which include opioids such as morphine and codeine. This drives patients into opting for illicitly produced opioids. Since harmful ingredients may be included in the manufacturing of illicitly produced opioids, this may be one reason the nation has seen such a vast increase in cancer cases, since it is impossible to track and

regulate substances added to illicitly produced opioids. The Indian Health Service (IHS) has created an Opioid Strategy aiming to eliminate stigma regarding addiction and giving patients the adequate help they need. Since this initiative is governmental, it is clear that the Indian government is working on tackling the ongoing issue of the rise of opioid and prescription drug addiction.

### **China**

Historically, China has suffered from opioid abuse and addiction. In the 1980s, the issue of the widespread abuse of opioid prescription drugs re-emerged. In 2004, the number of registered addicts was 1.14 million, and roughly three fourths of them were heroin addicts. Currently, opioid dependence is being treated with clonidine or lofexidine, which are both non-opiate medications. Apart from this, Chinese herbal medicine and traditional medication has been used in order to tackle the rise of opioid and prescription drug addiction in the country.

### **Mali**

Despite the fact that Mali is gripped by war and terrorism, the opioid crisis and the misuse of tramadol remains a prominent issue throughout the nation. It is evident that the illegal trade and abuse of tramadol in Mali must be tackled in order to ensure the safety of people living in Mali. Unfortunately, no known efforts have been made by the Malian government to tackle the rise of opioid and prescription drug addiction.

### **Iran**

Iran ranked first in the world for largest annual prevalence of opiate use in 2015, which means it had the highest number of opioid addicts, per capita, in the world. One reason for this may be the cost of opium, which is actually cheaper to buy than beer. The Iranian government intercepts only a tiny proportion out of the thousands of tons of opium that are trafficked through Iran each year. Therefore, the Iranian government should make additional efforts in tackling the issue of the rise of opioid and prescription drug addiction.

### **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has been the world's leading illicit opium producer since 2001, posing as a great drug and crime threat. In 2007, 93% of the non-pharmaceutical opiates on the world market were traced back and had originated in Afghanistan. Consequently, a dedicated project was established in 2008 to help monitor and achieve a holistic understanding of the global impact of Afghanistan based opiates.

### **Myanmar**

Between February and April of 2020, an anti-narcotics operation took place in Myanmar. The largest quantity of synthetic drugs in the history of Southeast Asia were uncovered, and substantial evidence of fentanyl production in the region was found. Despite this, the government has made efforts to eradicate narcotics by inviting neighbouring countries, such as Thailand, Laos, and China, to collaborate with each other and implement a plan that will reduce narcotic drug and opioid production.

### United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC is the global leader in the fight against illicit drugs. It aims to educate people regarding the dangers of drug abuse and to strengthen international action against illicit drug production and trafficking drug-related crime. “To achieve those aims, UNODC has launched a range of initiatives, including alternatives in the area of illicit drug crop cultivation, monitoring of illicit crops and the implementation of projects against money laundering.”<sup>9</sup>

### American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM)

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) is an organization which aims to address the addiction problem through advocacy, education, and treatment. In order to tackle the issue of addiction holistically, the organization has implemented a set of criteria in order to create a psychological assessment of an individual, so they can receive the best treatment possible.

### World Health Organization (WHO)

The WHO provides extensive information on its website, which outlines key facts, risk factors, emergency responses, prevention, and recommendations in regards to opioid overdose. Previous attempts to solve the issue have generally revolved around conventions, suggestions, strategies highlighting key points that need to be addressed and raising awareness on the issue.

## TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of event
3400 BC	The opium poppy is initially cultivated in lower Mesopotamia, an area that is currently named Southeast Asia.
1820	Illegal trade of opium by British traders grows dramatically, resulting in widespread opioid addiction in China.
1839	The Opium Wars begin in Guangzhou, China. 1839 marks the beginning of the first Opium Wars.
1842	The first Opium War comes to an end, resulting in the Treaty of Nanjing.
1856	The second Opium War takes place.
1860	The second Opium War ends after China signs the Beijing Convention.
1898	Heroin is first introduced for commercial distribution in the United States by the same company that produces Aspirin.

<sup>9</sup> “UNOV.” The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [www.unov.org/unov/en/unodc.html](http://www.unov.org/unov/en/unodc.html).



1924	The Anti-Heroin act in the United States bans the production and sale of heroin nationwide.
1971	The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime is established.
1990	1990 marks a rise in prescription opioid overdose deaths, referred to as the first wave of the opioid epidemic in the US.
2010	2010 marks a rise in heroin overdose deaths, referred to as the second wave of the opioid epidemic in the US.
2013	2013 marks a rise in synthetic opioid overdose deaths, referred to as the third wave of the opioid epidemic in the US.
2017	President of the United States, Donald Trump, as well as the HHS, declare the opioid epidemic a national health crisis.

### RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

#### Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961

This convention was initiated by the United Nations. It is an international treaty that prohibits the production and supply of specific drugs, with the exceptions of drugs used for medical purposes. It aims to combat drug abuse through coordinated international action.

#### United Nations Convention against illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances of 1988

This convention provides additional legal mechanisms for enforcing the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances. It also provides “comprehensive measures against drug trafficking, including provisions against money laundering and the diversion of precursor chemicals.” Finally, it promotes international cooperation to tackle the issue of the rise of opioid and prescription drug addiction.

#### Resolution 74/178- International cooperation to address and counter the world drug problem

This resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations aims to holistically address and counter the world drug problem. It stresses the importance of reinforcing international collaboration, conducting research and sharing scientific findings, raising awareness and educating the public, as well as recognizing drug dependence as a complex and multifaceted issue rather than a simple problem.

### PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

#### United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

After declaring the opioid crisis a public health emergency in 2017, the HHS has made tangible and multiple attempts to solve the issue. One example includes its 5-point strategy, which consists of the following points:

1. Improving access to treatment and recovery services
2. Promoting the use of overdose-reversing drugs
3. Strengthening understanding of the opioid crisis through improved public health surveillance
4. Providing support for cutting edge research on pain and addiction
5. Advancing better practices for pain management.

This strategy aims to empower local communities on the frontlines of the opioid epidemic. As a result, efforts to expand treatment are succeeding, seeing as 1.27 million Americans are receiving medication-assisted treatment, out of the approximate 2 million Americans suffering from an opioid disorder.

#### **American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM)**

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) has made efforts to solve the opioid crisis by publishing papers aiming to raise awareness to anyone that has access to their website. Furthermore, on their website, an opioid addiction treatment guide for patients, families, and friends has been published. It is a comprehensive guide that includes the definition of addiction, treatment overview, medication overview, and a set of questions for a patient to ask their clinician. This has been effective since it has raised awareness on the matter of the opioid crisis and has helped thousands of Americans receive the adequate help they require to win the battle against opioid addiction.

#### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

Efforts have been made by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to tackle the opioid crisis. On their website, there is information regarding the three waves of the opioid crisis, which aims to educate the public. Furthermore, their website includes resources on topics such as opioid basics, overdose prevention, information for patients, information for providers, and state information. This has likely been effective, since it is a practical form of educating the public regarding the opioid crisis.

#### **England's National Health Service (NHS)**

Apart from the efforts of US-based organizations, England's National Health Service (NHS) provides multiple resources, including guidance resources regarding efficient ways to receive treatment, on their website. This has likely been deemed effective in raising awareness in the United Kingdom since the NHS website includes statistics and hotlines relevant to the UK, which would be valuable resources for someone suffering from opioid or prescription drug addiction in the UK.

### **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

#### **Breaking the mental health stigma**

When considering solutions for solving the issue of the rise of opioid and prescription drug addiction, it is essential to think of ways in which this problem can be tackled as holistically as possible. Since there is often a positive correlation

between people that struggle with opioid addiction and people that may struggle with mental health issues, the first step in preventing addiction is addressing the mental health condition which may be present. This includes encouraging mental health discussions in schools or in the workplace, and raising awareness on mental health in order for it to become a less taboo topic. Furthermore, resources such as guidance counsellors in schools and utilizing a strong human resource department in the workplace are essential to ensuring that people remain mentally healthy, and have a certified expert available to them if needed.

### **Naxalone**

Naloxone, a drug that binds to opioid receptors but does not activate them, blocks other opioids from binding to these receptors and even knocks them off from receptors to prevent an overdose. The utilization of this drug is a promising solution for addressing opioid overdoses. It can be prescribed to the general public by doctors or through hospitals, when they judge its use is necessary.

### **Opioid maintenance programs**

If the aim is not to prevent but rather treat patients with opioid addiction, the importance of opioid maintenance programs should be emphasized. Unlike inpatient and outpatient programs which focus on psychotherapy and provide patients with medication, which can be expensive, affordable options may seem like a viable solution. However, affordable options have long waiting lists, and often require complete detoxification from opioids before beginning treatment, thus creating a withdrawal period for the patient, which may put an individual at risk of losing their job, due to the extreme side effects of withdrawal. Therefore, the most logical solution is an opioid maintenance program that is accessible to the majority in terms of pricing, in order to prevent a socioeconomic gap in opioid addiction treatment. This opioid maintenance program would aim to combat opioid addiction using a combination of medication and behavior therapy, which manages to avoid withdrawal symptoms and the psychoactive effects of painkillers. As a result, the patient would remain satisfied, and society would be safer, since former drug users would not have to undergo the painful and dangerous process of drug withdrawal.

### **Abuse-Deterrent Formulations (ADF)**

Abuse-deterrent formulations utilize technologies that are designed to prevent the misuse and abuse of opioids. Large pharmaceutical companies that distribute opioid products to pharmacies should be required to include ADF in every opioid prescription product, with the primary aim that no patient will misuse or abuse these substances. Legislation should be passed in all Member States stating that pharmaceutical companies must include agonist or antagonist combinations in prescription drugs containing opioids, since this would counteract the drug effect from being released if the drug is misused by a patient. As a result, even if there was an attempt to misuse an opioid containing prescription drugs, overdose and addiction

would be virtually impossible due to the presence of the agonist or antagonist substances.

### Databases for opioid-containing prescription drugs

If other solutions fail, then the creation of a database for opioid containing prescription drugs is promising. This database would be used by doctors and pharmacists to ensure that a patient has not abused their prescription. On the database, the name of a patient that was prescribed an opioid-containing drug would be written, and a doctor would prescribe the drug online. Once the patient wishes to buy the medicine in a pharmacy, the pharmacist would then receive an online notification via the database, and the pharmacist would then have to cross the patient's name off the database. This would indicate that the patient has bought the quantity of medicine necessary, according to his or her doctor, and therefore the risk of excessively buying an opioid-containing product will decrease drastically. For this measure to work, legislation must be passed stating that all pharmacists and doctors must utilize this database, so as to lessen opioid and prescription drug addiction.

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