

Opioid Abuse Is Everywhere

By STEVE FELLMAN, TAUC GENERAL COUNSEL

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, my wife and I had dinner with a couple we have known for many years. The dinner was in an upscale restaurant in Boca Raton, Florida. The man, recently retired, has a PhD and has held responsible positions in government and industry. For many years he has had to deal with chronic back pain which was not alleviated by multiple surgeries. After trying alternatives, his doctor prescribed opioids, which my friend now takes on a daily basis – he relies heavily on them, and feels he can't function without the prescription. During our dinner, my friend also confided that due to a concern over increased violence in our society, he had recently obtained a "carry permit" and was, in fact, carrying a loaded pistol under his shirt at the restaurant.

Unfortunately, my friend is a disaster waiting to happen. Although he obtains his pills legally, he is nevertheless

an addict – one who also happens to drive a fast car on public highways while legally carrying a loaded pistol. No, he doesn't fit the profile of the stereotypical person with a drug problem, but he is nevertheless representative of a growing number of people from all walks of life who have fallen into the opioid trap.

Take the construction industry, where opioid abuse is also a huge problem. My friend knows nothing about our industry, but he has a lot in common with the craftworkers who struggle on a daily basis with their addiction. See if this sounds familiar: a worker is hurt on the job and goes to a doctor, who prescribes a short course of an opioid to alleviate the pain during the recovery process. The worker finds that if he takes the drugs, his pain goes away and he can go back to work immediately. That is the beginning. Eventually, his doctor refuses to prescribe more opioids, so the worker goes to another doctor, or may find an illegal source of the drug. From a physical standpoint, his injury has healed long ago, but in its place the worker now is addicted to opioids.

In the union construction industry, owners, contractors and unions are all concerned about safety. We know that union workers on the job must rely on one another to work safely and prevent dangerous situations. However, we also know that having an opioid addict or a worker taking heavy opioids on the job imperils everyone. That worker is a danger to his or her family at home; a danger to him or herself and other motorists when driving to work; and a danger to everyone on the job.

Working together, all three legs of the "tripartite stool" must seek out the best way to identify and deal with employees who are either taking opioids on a short-term basis or who are addicted. These people need help. In recent months, there has been much publicity describing the magnitude of this problem. We cannot deny that the problem exists. My friend is an example of the pervasive nature of the problem – it is literally everywhere. We need to work together and find a solution. This is a responsibility that we all must accept -- and we must take action now!



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