

IT'S ABOUT PAIN

A Tale of Two Citizens

Patient 1: Allison, a 45 year old certified nurses assistant suffered a severe injury, leaving her with chronic pain requiring opioids. She continued working. However, her physician in Oakland decided to stop prescribing opioids for her. She was unable to function without pain meds, and lost her job. Frantic for pain relief, and unable to find a doctor willing to prescribe for her, she discovered Fentanyl. Great pain relief---much better than oxycodone she'd had in the past. However, her dependence on Fentanyl got her in with a "bad crowd" and she overdosed. Her body, still alive, was jettisoned from a car onto a street—not the usual dump of an overdosed patient in the hospital parking lot. She was brain dead and was kept alive long enough for organ transplant team to do its work. The family is heartbroken.

Patient 2: Leon, is a 67 year old retired accountant whose fractured neck did not heal well after multiple surgeries. To function, he required oxycodone and oxymorphone with MME 180. In 2022, when Walmart stopped filling our prescriptions for opioids, he switched to Rite Aid. When they withdrew in the summer of 2023, he transferred to Fred Meyer, which stopped our prescriptions in the fall of 2023. To Safeway, but they abandoned our patients in December 2023. Then CVS and Walgreens were "full."

His caregiver called 60 pharmacies located between South Portland and Tacoma; each declined to accept a patient with chronic pain. Life was unbearable; he threatened suicide. She hid his shotgun.

Making numerous calls, our MA Bethany found Centralia Pharmacy to be willing to accept him. Meanwhile, we submitted a consultation request to Dr. Platt at Vancouver Pain. After a 6 month wait, a spinal cord stimulator was placed. Presto, no pain. So, no more opioid prescriptions. And with pain and anxiety relieved, no more anti-hypertensives needed. Anxiolytics and antidepressants were dc'd. Friends and family say he is a "new man."

Prescriptions of opioids kept Leon alive long enough for his number to be called by the busy interventional pain clinic.

No doubt there are tragedies like Allison all over America. Per the National Pain Advocacy Center,

- Half of doctors refuse to accept any patient with chronic pain.
- Less than 20% of doctors are willing to prescribe opioids for chronic pain.

And many mail order pharmacists will only approve opiate prescriptions written by Pain Clinic providers. But regional Pain Clinics generally choose to "leave the prescriptions to the PCP" or "Why would we want to get involved in THAT mess!"

Nationally there are millions of patients at risk for fentanyl overdose or suicide because they are cut off and cannot find a willing prescriber. In our panel of 531, 39% said they'd buy street drugs or consider suicide if cut off. Several have tried street drugs or suicide, fortunately without dying. But the options for prescriptions are few, and even those few willing pharmacies have supply chain issues. Every day, we work the phones to find supplies. It is very stressful. But patients like Leon keep us going.