

EVALUATING ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEGALIZING CANADIAN ONLINE PHARMACIES AFTER OPIOID EPIDEMIC MESSAGING STATEMENTS

John Hertig PharmD, MS, CPPS*, Chelsea Anderson PharmD, MBA, BCPS*,
Kathryn Marwitz PharmD, MPH**, McKenna Harrell, PharmD Candidate[‡]

Introduction: Obtaining opioids online through illegal sources contributes to the opioid epidemic. Proposed legislation would legalize the use of Canadian online pharmacies citing that increased market competition can help lower drug prices. However, improved access to necessary prescription medication may unintentionally enhance access to illicit, unsafe, and addictive medication such as opioids. The objective of this analysis was to examine survey participants' attitudes towards the legalization of Canadian online pharmacies after educational messaging on the opioid epidemic.

Methods: A standardized, 49-question survey was conducted by a contract research firm to collect data on 500 Indiana consumers regarding online pharmacy use and risk perception. Respondents were then presented with educational information regarding the risks associated with online pharmacy use and their overall risk perception was subsequently reassessed.

Results: When respondents were asked about the legality of purchasing prescription medications from a Canadian online pharmacy, 43% responded saying it was legal, 18% indicated it was illegal, and 39% were unsure. A majority of respondents (58%) favored legalization of Canadian online pharmacies, 22% of respondents opposed legalization, and 20% of respondents were unsure. Following opioid educational information, 29% of respondents favored legalization, 56% of respondents opposed that legislation, and 15% of respondents were unsure.

Conclusion: A majority of survey respondents were either unaware if Canadian online pharmacies were legal for U.S. consumers or thought it was legal to purchase medications from Canadian online pharmacies. Following education regarding illegal online pharmacy contributions to the opioid epidemic, increased opposition to legalization of Canadian online pharmacies was observed. These results and the implications of additional messaging statements should be further explored to help educate on the dangers of illegal online pharmacies and its association with the opioid epidemic.

*Affiliated with Purdue University College of Pharmacy
Center for Medication Safety Advancement, Fishers, IN.

**Regulatory fellow with Purdue University College of
Pharmacy, West Lafayette, IN.

[‡]Purdue University College of Pharmacy 2018 PharmD
Candidate, West Lafayette, IN.

October 2017

Introduction

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated over 33,000 people died of an opioid overdose in 2015 in the United States.¹ Deaths from opioids have quadrupled since 1999, and the US Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis recommended declaring the opioid epidemic a national emergency.² Opioid

medications are obtained through legal and illegal means including the use of illegal online pharmacies. While legal online pharmacies exist, 96% of online pharmacies are illegal.³

The differences between legal and illegal online pharmacies in the United States are often misunderstood. Legal U.S. online pharmacies must meet regulations set forth by the state board of pharmacy in the state where they declare a physical address.⁴ Despite these regulations, illegal online pharmacies often attempt to operate under the auspices of a legal online pharmacy with the intention of deceiving the consumer. While it may be challenging to differentiate between legal and illegal online pharmacies, Americans might use resources provided by organizations such as the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) to help identify noticeable differences.⁴

In addition to state-specific regulations, federal entities such as the U.S. Congress, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) can each propose laws or regulations for online pharmacies.⁴ For example, The *Ryan Haight Online Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act of 2008* mandates the use of a valid prescription and in-person consultations from a physician to sell controlled substances from online pharmacies.⁵ The Act also requires internet pharmacies in the United States to disclose specific operational information, such as their location, and shields consumers from fraudulent online pharmacies.

In contrast, it is illegal to purchase prescription medications from Canadian online pharmacies as a U.S. citizen regardless of its legality in Canada. While Canada has legal and illegal online pharmacies respective to their own country's laws, the United States

does not have jurisdiction over medications that originate in Canadian online pharmacies and cannot ensure safety for U.S. citizens. However, members of the U.S. Congress have proposed legislation that would allow U.S. citizens to purchase medications from Canadian online pharmacies. Proponents of this legislation maintain legal online drug importation increases competition, thus lowering drug prices and increasing access to medications in the United States.⁶

The objective of this analysis was to examine survey participants' attitudes towards the legalization of Canadian online pharmacies in the United States after educational messaging on the opioid epidemic.

Methods

A phone and electronic survey of registered Indiana consumers was conducted from May 18th to May 23rd, 2017. The list of participants was obtained by Baselice & Associates, Inc.[†] who also conducted the survey. Survey participants were excluded from participation if they: were not registered voters in the state of Indiana, were employed in the news media, worked for market research firms, were an elected official, or were actively involved with political campaigns.

After ensuring eligibility, a standardized, 49-question survey was employed to collect data on online pharmacy use. Five-hundred (500) individuals were asked about their current use of online pharmacies and baseline perception of risk. These results, including participant demographics, are presented in a separate paper.⁷ Respondents were then presented with educational information regarding risks

[†]Baselice & Associates, Inc. is a national research organization with experience in public affairs, corporate research, and legal research.

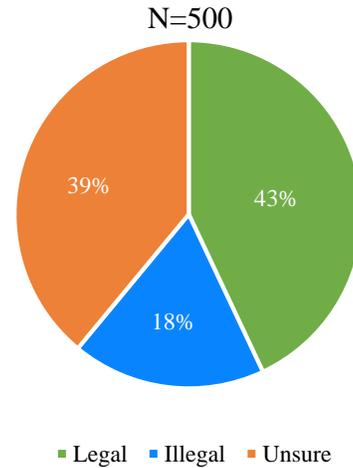
associated with online pharmacy use and their overall risk perception was reassessed. For this analysis, survey questions regarding Canadian online pharmacy legality in the United States was the focus.

Results

When U.S. consumers were asked about the legality of purchasing prescription medications from a Canadian online pharmacy in the United States, 43% responded saying it was legal, 18% responded saying it was illegal, and 39% were unsure (Figure 1).

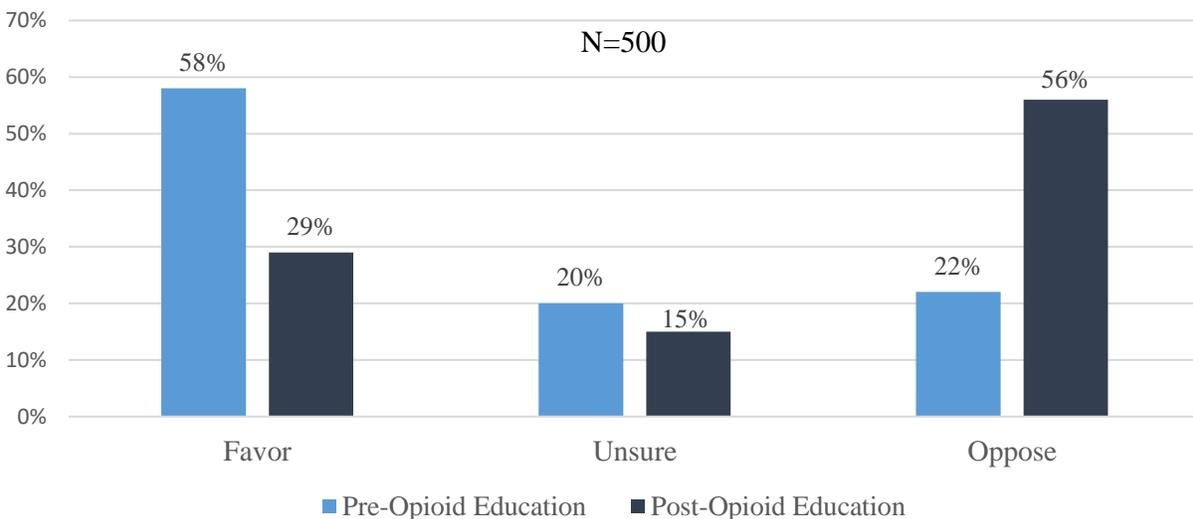
Survey participants were informed that Canadian online pharmacy purchases of prescription medication is currently illegal and asked whether they favored or opposed legislation to legalize this process. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of respondents favored legalization, 22% of respondents opposed legalization, and 20% of respondents were unsure (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Perceived Legality of Canadian Online Pharmacies



Then, respondents were informed that the use of Canadian online pharmacies could worsen the opioid epidemic by allowing individuals increased access to opioid medications and their opinion towards Canadian online pharmacy legalization was reassessed. After messaging, 29% of respondents favored legalization of prescription medication purchases from Canadian online pharmacies, 56% of

Figure 2: Consumer Legalization Attitudes for Canadian Online Pharmacies Comparing Pre-Opioid versus Post-Opioid Education



respondents now opposed the legislation, and 15% of respondents were unsure (Figure 2).

Discussion

Initially, a majority of survey respondents (82%) were either unaware if Canadian online pharmacies were legal or thought it was legal to purchase medications from Canadian online pharmacies. A majority of respondents (58%) indicated that they favored legalization of Canadian online pharmacies before receiving educational messaging on the opioid epidemic. The survey results suggest that educating on the association between Canadian online pharmacies and the opioid epidemic influences individuals to oppose the legalization of Canadian online pharmacies.

Purchasing medications from illegal online pharmacies presents significant risks to public health. Medications sold from illegal online pharmacies are not regulated by FDA and can vary in strength, purity, and may contain other dangerous substances.⁸ For example, the FDA purchased different products online that claimed to be Tamiflu (oseltamivir), an antiviral used for the treatment of influenza. However, instead of the active ingredient, one of the products contained acetaminophen and talc powder.⁹ The FDA has also received reports from consumers who were given haloperidol, a powerful anti-psychotic drug, instead of the medication they ordered online. Many of these consumers needed to seek medical treatment for difficulty breathing or muscle stiffness, which are side effects of haloperidol.⁹

The opioid epidemic has also created a market for counterfeit opioids. The sale of counterfeit opioids is lucrative and can generate millions of dollars in profit for

nefarious manufacturers and suppliers.⁸ These counterfeits may be laced with other substances, such as fentanyl, which can cause unintentional overdoses and even death.⁸ Unfortunately, these counterfeit drugs can be difficult to identify as manufacturers design them to look like legitimate medications.⁹

Approximately 12% of illegal online pharmacies offer to sell controlled substances without a prescription.³ This internet opioid traffic bypasses the traditional medication supply chain and may be used both intentionally and unintentionally if consumers are unable to obtain medications through traditional channels.³ The illegal sale of controlled substances contributes to the opioid epidemic and puts the public at risk of receiving counterfeit or tainted medications.³ Furthermore, individuals purchasing from illegal online pharmacies are at a higher risk of credit card fraud, identity theft, and computer viruses.¹⁰

The public remains unaware of the association between illegal online pharmacies and the opioid epidemic. While perceived lower drug prices may appear advantageous, there are significant risks associated with increased use of illegal online pharmacies.

Conclusions/Recommendation

These results suggest increased opposition to legalization of Canadian online pharmacies after participants were made aware that illegal online pharmacies contributed to the opioid epidemic. This trend and the implications of additional messaging statements should be further explored to help educate on the dangers of illegal online pharmacies and its association with the opioid epidemic.

REFERENCES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Opioid Overdose. Available at: www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/index. Accessed September 19, 2017
2. Commission Interim Report. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/ondcp/commission-interim-report.pdf>. Accessed September 21, 2017.
3. Internet Drug Outlet Identification Program, National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, 2016.
4. VIPPS. National Associations of Boards of Pharmacy. Available at: <https://nabp.pharmacy/programs/vipps/faqs/>. Accessed September 9, 2017.
5. GovTrack. H.R. 6353 (110th): Ryan Haight Online Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act of 2008. Available at: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hr6353/text>. Accessed October 4, 2017.
6. Sanders, Bernie. S.469 – Affordable and Safe Prescription Drug Importation Act. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/469/text>. Accessed September 21, 2017.
7. Hertig J, Anderson C, Scott C, Marwitz K, Walters K, Wasynczuk J. Evaluation of Risk Perception Associated with Online Pharmacy Use. Available at: <http://asopfoundation.pharmacy/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ASOP-White-Paper-Final.pdf>. Accessed October 10, 2017.
8. Counterfeit Prescription Pills Containing Fentanyl: A Global Threat. Drug Enforcement Agency Intelligence Brief. July 2016. Available at: <https://www.dea.gov/docs/Counterfeit%20Prescription%20Pills.pdf>. Accessed October 3, 2017.
9. The Possible Dangers of Buying Medicines over the Internet. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm048396.htm>. Accessed October 10, 2017.
10. U.S. Food & Drug Administration. FDA Conducts major global operation to protect consumers from potentially dangerous prescription drugs sold online. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm577178.htm>. Accessed October 4, 2017.

The authors would like to acknowledge the Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies Foundation (ASOP Global Foundation) for their financial support of this research.