



Maureen Elias: My Personal Story to the FDA on Accidental Addiction



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Good afternoon. Thank you for allowing me time to share my personal story about opioids with you.

If someone had told me that in 2016 I might become addicted to opioids, I would have laughed in their face. I didn't have the time for any kind of drug use, unless you count the occasional glass of wine or chocolate bar consumption. I was President of my university's student veteran association, VP of the graduate students association, attending the Student Veterans of America Leadership Institute, taking a full load of graduate classes, and, in case that wasn't enough, I was also a military spouse and mother raising three children on the autism spectrum. But everything came to a grinding halt when a 7mm kidney stone lodged in my ureter, blocking the flow from my kidney, and I was admitted for emergency surgery.

Following this emergency surgery, I thought the pain would get better. I was very wrong. Within days after the surgery, I began to feel a lot of pain and pressure. I was told this was normal with a stent and I was prescribed three different forms of opioids; opana, a long-lasting opioid, as well as hydrocodone and OxyContin, both short-acting opioids. I remember sitting in the bathroom, silently sobbing on the toilet every time I tried to go. The pain was excruciating and the doses of opioid pain medication were increased to fairly high doses in order to allow me to function within my various roles. I was on these opioids for about a month when they finally did a follow up x-ray. They discovered my stent had slipped and was trying to exit from my urethra. "No wonder I was in so much pain!"

I had my second surgery within hours of that x-ray. As soon as the stent was removed, the pain was immediately eradicated. I went home that day, I remember it was a Friday, and immediately ceased all my opioid medications. Little was I prepared for the nightmare that weekend had in store for me. Within six hours following the surgery I began feeling very ill. I thought, "What kind of killer flu is this? I KNEW I would catch something going to the hospital". I was exhausted and constantly yawning and yet wide awake. My whole body ached. I was sweaty and freezing at the same time. My nose was runny. I felt like my heart was beating so hard it might bust out of my ribcage. And I began running a fever. Hence my assumption was I might have caught the flu. The one peculiar symptom was that for some reason, I kept feeling tears pouring out from my eyes. I am not much of a crier and this was very upsetting to my husband who never likes to see me cry.

Things got worse. My body was wracked with cramps from the nausea and diarrhea. Despite being buried under mountains of blankets, I had goosebumps and I felt so cold while simultaneously burning alive. I thought I was dying. I considered taking more of my opioids thinking perhaps the pain had not, in fact, gone away. This might have become the beginning of an addiction to opioids because I was confusing the symptoms of withdrawal with the symptoms of my pain. Neither my ER doctor nor my primary care doctor had mentioned opioid withdrawal symptoms once.

It just so happened that I was just starting the chapter on opioids in my drug and alcohol use disorder class at school. As I read about the symptoms of opioid withdrawal, I knew this was exactly what I was suffering. Relief poured through my body as I realized I was not going to have to say goodbye to my children as I died from this horrible, unknown flu. I read that by 72 hours, things were the worst and

since I had just passed that time mark, I did not see my doctor since I knew I the symptoms would be decreasing shortly.

Then I got angry. "How dare they?" I thought. "How dare they not have prepared me for what I went through!" Not even once were opioid withdrawal symptoms mentioned. Not even a cheesy cartoon flyer or handout was given to me. No preparations had been made to help me get access to medications that might have relieved my suffering and the toll on my already weakened physical state. NOTHING!

I know I am extremely lucky because I was able to recognize that I had become physically dependent on opioids and was able to suffer through the withdrawal and have not had any signs of addiction since. But I was in a graduate school and focused on drug and alcohol substance use disorder; not everyone has this type of serendipitous circumstance. Not everyone can discriminate between the symptoms of withdrawal and the symptoms of their pain.

And while medical professionals can do more to prepare patients for withdrawal symptoms of opioids, there is definitely a need in the medical world for a non-narcotic, non- opioid medication to focus on withdrawal management for those wishing to discontinue use of opioids, especially for individuals like me who while not addicted, have become physically dependent on opioids.

In fact, I wonder how many patients go back on their opioid medications mistaking their withdrawal symptoms, for the pain they were taking the medication for in the first place, therefore becoming accidentally addicted. A medication like this could be a game changer in preventing accidental addictions.