

Opiates in the office

While opioids take a toll in terms of deaths, they also take a toll in terms of the workplace, impacting both employees directly and as caregivers, further compounding the economic as well as the human costs of the opioid epidemic.

"We don't know how many people are affected in the workplace. There's not a good way to tell. That is a secret we don't know the answer to," Dominique Camacho Moran, a partner who leads the labor and employment practice at Farrell Fritz in Uniondale, said. "This issue impacts the workplace on a day-to-day basis. It impacts it from the perspective of productivity. It impacts it from the perspective of attendance, relationships in the workplace."

The average amount of opioids dispensed to injured workers declined from 2010 and 2013 over two years following the injury, according to the Workers Compensation Research Institute.

"Despite the reductions, opioid use was prevalent among nonsurgical claims with more than seven days of lost time," according to the group.

All kinds of substance abuse impact the workplace, but opioids are becoming the newest, if not necessarily the biggest, factor.

"One thing that's important to be aware of is that alcohol is still a bigger problem in the workplace than opioids," Jon Morgenstern, Northwell Health's director of addiction services for the Center for Addiction Services and Psycho-

therapy Intervention Research. "But opioids are a large problem. They're being prescribed by physicians."

From 2013-2015, between 65 percent and 75 percent of injured workers with pain medications received opioid prescriptions in most states.

The average amounts of opioids received in New York, Louisiana and Pennsylvania were the highest among the 26 study states studied.

"Although New York is among the states with a higher-than-typical amount, it is important to note the substantial decrease in both the frequency and amount of opioids in New York over the study period," according to the group.

"Look at the number of people addicted; it's significant, there's lost productivity, sick days, insurance claims, slips and falls," Jeffrey Reynolds, CEO of Mineola-based Family and Children's Association, said. "When you look at the economics, the costs are really big."

A survey by the National Safety Council found that 70 percent of businesses say that narcotic painkillers have affected their business.

Medication addictions may not be as noticeable as some other substance abuse problems. They can be an invisible epidemic until they're fatal.

"The easy part of booze is people smell of it," Camacho Moran said. "The symptoms are easier to see. Their ability to function when they're drunk is observable."



Domenique Camacho Moran, a partner at Farrell Fritz

While employers have experience identifying alcoholism, this legal drug epidemic is different. Plus there is a medical aspect that makes it difficult for employers to inquire, in case they're somehow violating privacy.

"In the workplace, we're struggling with how to identify and manage this and at what point we decide that we can't manage it," Camacho Moran added. "At what point is it that we have to excess someone, separate someone from an employment scenario because they can't or shouldn't function in the workplace?"

The problem in the workplace, though, goes far beyond those using medications improperly. Many employees have to care for those overwhelmed by drugs as well as those suffering in a silent, if deadly, epidemic.

And there is a danger that

those abusing opioids in certain jobs could injure others.

"They're trying to manage a very human problem in a place with others who are not their mother or sister," Camacho Moran continued. "These are people who go to work in the morning. They don't expect to be hit by a forklift driven by someone high on oxycodone."

Employee assistance programs, complete with hotlines, can help people, if they choose to reach out for that resource. But companies have to be careful that they don't overstep their authority.

"They don't have the ability to ask questions about health-care, personal history or family history or even what their problems are," Camacho Moran said. "That's a loaded question. Employers need to be careful how far into that they go."

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