

Media Portrayal of Opioid Overdoses as Suicide in America in the 19th Century
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Abstract: Opioid-related overdoses and deaths are currently associated with the habitual use and abuse of opioids used for non-prescribed purposes. An historical sociological study of *New York Times* articles is conducted, focusing on articles published between 1851 and 1909, when opioid overdose deaths were often declared suicides. Articles appeared to start with the presumption of suicide, despite an apparent lack of evidence, and a narrative was built around this presumption. It is proposed that many of these deaths were not suicides and stops short of attempting to declare the actual cause of death, but includes potential alternative interpretations.

Keywords: opioids, morphine, laudanum, media narrative, suicide, addiction, overdose

Introduction

A recent increase in prescription and non-prescription related opioid overdoses and deaths in the United States, now commonly referred to as the “Opioid Crisis,” has become a significant topic of public discourse. The situation has, in turn, elicited a shift in how Americans and the news media describe drug use as a social problem, contextualizing drug users as victims where they were once considered criminals. The solutions being called for in addressing the situation, treatment as opposed to criminal punishment, bely the change in the demographics of who is most visibly affected by the Opioid Crisis.¹² Racial and class differences have been pointed out as dimensions of narrative inequality, with rich White Americans factoring higher than poor Whites who, in turn, are given still more rhetorical leeway and importance than Blacks and other minorities in the overall narrative of drug abuse, crime and punishment.³⁴

¹ Maria M Orsini, "Frame Analysis of Drug Narratives in Network News Coverage," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 44, no. 3 (2017).

² Jennafer Vondal, "Fake News? Newspaper Accounts of the U.S. Opioid Crisis," in *American Society of Criminology* (2017).

³ Rebecca Tiger, "Race, Class, and the Framing of Drug Epidemics," *Contexts* 16, no. 4 (2017).

⁴ Stephen Toppings Young, "Drugs in the Hills: Film Depictions of the Reality of Drug Addiction in Appalachia," in *American Society of Criminology* (2017).

This double-standard played out contrary to expectation in America as racial stereotypes led heroin dealers from Mexico to sell almost exclusively to Whites, shunning Black heroin users and, instead, using aggressive sales strategies and leading to expansion into rural areas and small towns where opioid pill addiction had previously been the norm.⁵ Opioid pill usage and addiction had skyrocketed for a few decades previous to the current rash of opioid overdose deaths due, in large part, to a pharmaceutical industry that believed in the proactive treatment of pain with opioids and that did so under the assumption that opioids were all but non-addictive when used in treating pain.⁶ The result of a single paragraph in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1980 – American prescription of opioids and opioid-related overdose deaths doubled between 1999 and 2004 and again between 2004 and 2008 – a trend not fully noticed or contextualized until years later and coming as a shock to the American medical profession.⁷⁸

It is a slow and steady movement of opioid use and habit, coupled with the apparent obfuscation and tacit acceptance of policy makers and professionals that played a large role in the proliferation of opioid addiction and death that is now described as the current “Opioid Crisis.” This, in turn, is part of a pattern in how opioid use and addiction has been obscured through misdirection and even spurred on through what was considered, at the time, to be sound medical advice.

⁵ Sam Quinones, "Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic," *Health Affairs* 34, no. 9 (2015).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jane Porter and Hershel Jick, "Addiction Rare in Patients Treated with Narcotics," *The New England journal of medicine* 302, no. 2 (1980).

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Vital Signs: Overdoses of Prescription Opioid Pain Relievers---United States, 1999--2008," *MMWR. Morbidity and mortality weekly report* 60, no. 43 (2011).

Literature

A complete history of opioids has already been undertaken and published, but done so before the full extent of America's current opioid problem was known. *Opium: A History* serves as a thorough document addressing the historical, political, and social contexts of the "Opioid Crisis." Opium has been the direct or indirect cause of several international conflicts, and opium addiction has been used as means of demoralizing subjugated peoples.⁹

Opium as a commodity had been available in America since before the Revolutionary War. A recurring advertisement in Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* running from 1750 to 1751 noted the wares to be sold by one Christopher Marshall, a list that included opium, giving description of his shop's location on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia.¹⁰ Opium had been grown in America, by both the Union and Confederacy during the Civil War, and in states as disparate in climate as New Hampshire and California.¹¹

Taking a broad historical view, opium has had a long history of possessing the seemingly paradoxical properties of salvific curative and deadly poison. At any given time and place, however, either the positive or negative aspects of the opium poppy were emphasized. Ancient Romans knew of opium to be an effective killer, using it for suicide as well as for murder.¹² This knowledge was not necessarily apparent in the 17th Century when, in 1753, Dr. George Young wrote that opium concoctions such as laudanum are a "slow poison ... when improperly given."¹³¹⁴ Consideration of problem opium habit and addiction developed later, though

⁹ Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2013).

¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, "To Be Sold by Christopher Marshall," ed. Benjamin Franklin (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: 1750).

¹¹ Booth.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ George Young, "A Treatise on Opium," *London: Millar* (1753).

¹⁴ John Hill, *The Family Herbal* (London: George Virtue, 2011); *ibid.*

addiction was initially considered to be a mild inconvenience.¹⁵

As addiction became a problematized, the goal of finding a non-addictive means of consuming opioids yielded various innovations – all doomed to only exacerbate the problem. One such innovation thought to end the addictive need for opioids was the invention of the hypodermic needle.¹⁶ Heroin, too, was initially believed to be a non-addictive opioid.¹⁷ The pattern of using opioids as either non-addictive form of, or cure for, opioids can be seen up to the present day. Methadone, for instance, was developed when Nazi Germany needed their own form of opioid painkillers and which later became the centerpiece of American maintenance of heroin addiction.¹⁸ Present day drug rehabilitation facilities include sophisticated treatment, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, along with the administration of methadone and Suboxone (buprenorphine and naloxone), another potentially addictive opioid.¹⁹²⁰ The current “Opioid Crisis,” therefore, fits a longstanding pattern in that it apparently began with an American medical community adopting the belief that opioids were not addictive when the patient was in pain.²¹²²²³

Public opinion and policy regarding opioids and other addictive substances in America have thus far maintained a cyclical pattern, from laissez faire to fearful and intolerant and back

¹⁵ David F Musto, "Opium, Cocaine and Marijuana in American History," *Scientific American* 265, no. 1 (1991).

¹⁶ Booth.

¹⁷ Quinones.

¹⁸ Booth.

¹⁹ James Bell et al., "A Pilot Study of Buprenorphine–Naloxone Combination Tablet (Suboxone®) in Treatment of Opioid Dependence," *Drug and Alcohol Review* 23, no. 3 (2004).

²⁰ Akikur Mohammad et al., "Long-Term Suboxone Maintenance Therapy for Opioid Use Disorder: 2 Case Reports," *Open Journal of Psychiatry* 6, no. 02 (2016).

²¹ Porter and Jick.

²² Quinones.

²³ National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Opioid Crisis," National Institute of Health, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-crisis#three>.

again.²⁴ Periods of relaxed drug attitude and policy often sewing future drug panics, whereby the same chemicals available to one generation are reimagined as somehow new and imminently dangerous. Such drug panics have a history of being linked to a substance that has been associated with a stigmatized social group.²⁵

Booth suggests that opium addicts took a generation or more to “discover” morphine, and recounts what the *Times* would readily suggest as the occasional morphine and laudanum-induced suicide.²⁶ A critical reading of some of the news stories that report these suicides, however, leave reason for skepticism.

Opioids as a factor in suicide are addressed in Addiction and Suicide literatures. General and specific risk factors among heroin users make them 13 times more likely to commit suicide than non-users but, notable for this study, they are unlikely to kill themselves by means of a heroin overdose.²⁷ Follow up studies show a potentially elevated risk of suicide in those prescribed high doses of opioids, but the method in which suicide is attempted or accomplished was not impacted (making suicide by drug overdose no more likely than any other mode of suicide).²⁸ Such findings conflict with the media narrative on the topic described below.

Method

A keyword search of *New York Times* articles from 1851 to 1909 was conducted and accessed through the ProQuest digital archive. Opioid terms (e.g. opium, morphine, heroin,

²⁴ Musto.

²⁵ Deborah Ahrens, "Drug Panics in the Twenty-First Century: Ecstasy, Prescription Drugs, and the Reframing of the War on Drugs," *Alb. Gov't L. Rev.* 6 (2013).

²⁶ Booth.

²⁷ Shane Darke and Joanne Ross, "Suicide among Heroin Users: Rates, Risk Factors and Methods," *Addiction* 97, no. 11 (2002).

²⁸ Mark A Ilgen et al., "Opioid Dose and Risk of Suicide," *Pain* 157, no. 5 (2016).

paregoric, laudanum, etc.) were searched alongside mention of suicide in news articles originating in the United States. The search produced 251 results and constitute what will be described as the media narrative of suicide in opioid use. A critical exploratory study of this media narrative is provided with the goal of enhancing understanding of how media narratives may impact public opinion and policy. The timeframe with the founding of the *New York Times*, and start of the archive, in 1851. The study ends in 1909 because, along with various policy changes regarding opioids, the trend of opioid overdoses being reported as suicides waned around 1900, the last domestic news story of its kind in 1929. Articles in which a suicide involved opioids along with other known poisons (e.g. strychnine) are omitted.

Findings

Overdose deaths involving morphine or laudanum were quite often described as suicides up until 1909. Of the 251 news articles reviewed, only 1 article was printed from 1851-1859, 8 from 1860-1869, 126 from 1870-1879, 94 from 1880-1889, at which point it fell to 6 from 1890-1899, and 16 from 1900-1909. An additional 48 articles were originally collected between 1910 and 1993 but nearly all of them were erroneous (not in topic) or an opioid was used alongside a drug known at the time to be fatal. One news article in 1916 and one in 1929 could have been included but added nothing to the analysis.

The newspaper chronicled several cases in which a coroner ruled a death to be a suicide, where opioids were present but no suicide note was found and no previous history of attempted suicide was noted. These articles often contain suggestions of either a higher social status of the decedent, or some allusion to a possible motive. One example was that of “a young and

respectably dressed man lying on a bench” in Brooklyn, no further reason to declare his death a suicide was given.²⁹

News articles describing completed and attempted suicides involving opioids were common, but often lacked further explanation as to why suicide was suspected.³⁰³¹³²³³ In many of the supposed suicides by laudanum, “pecuniary” issues (financial distress) was given as the presumed cause but without a document showing a deliberate decision had been made, this too remains conjecture.³⁴³⁵ Common overdose deaths declared suicides – that of medical professionals – beg reconsideration. A hundred years later, addiction among doctors is viewed as an occupational hazard.³⁶³⁷³⁸³⁹

A lack of mention of a suicide note did not appear to be due to a journalistic concern for the privacy of the dead person’s loved ones. When a note was present it was noted and, sometimes, the contents printed. Such was the case with the suicide of Dr. B. L. Seago, editor of the Atlanta newspaper *The Era*. Dr. Seago wrote five separate suicide notes to five different addressees, each one printed in full in the *St. Louis Democrat* – one to his uncle, one to his editor, another each for his readership and for the proprietors of the hotel in which he committed the act – his last a detailed description of his final moments before death. Among the literate

²⁹ "Possible Attempt at Suicide," *New York Times* 1881.

³⁰ "Narrow Escape from Death by Morphine," *New York Times*, July 31, 1865.

³¹ "Another Suicide," *New York Times*, September 24, 1867.

³² "Suicide at Fox Lake, Wisconsin," *New York Times*, April 9, 1867.

³³ "City and Suburban News," *New York Times*, February 4, 1892.

³⁴ "Suicide of a Wandering Showman," *New York Times*, May 4, 1875.

³⁵ "Another Suicide."

³⁶ "Cincinnati.: Suicide of a Physician," *New York Times*, November 6, 1866.

³⁷ "Suicide of a Brooklyn Physician," *New York Times*, May 17, 1873.

³⁸ "A Victim to Opium," *New York Times*, October 21, 1883.

³⁹ Deborah Brooke, Griffith Edwards, and Colin Taylor, "Addiction as an Occupational Hazard: 144 Doctors with Drug and Alcohol Problems," *Addiction* 86, no. 8 (1991).

man's final inked words "Welcome, O death! To live is to suffer unutterably; to die is to be at rest."⁴⁰ If an example of a deliberate suicide were needed, this would be it, but other suicides where a note was present were given the same treatment – if suicide notes were found, they were often transcribed or quoted in the *Times*.⁴¹⁴² This serves to contrast the several cases of equally literate persons reported as dead by presumed suicide.

In one article, the earliest article in this study, it is unclear that suicide meant the same thing that it means today. The term "suicide" may have been used euphemistically to describe overdose deaths, in an 1859 *Times* article decrying "The Alarming Increase in Suicides." Upon close reading, the "suicides" described involving opium suggest something that most contemporary readers would understand as the physical decline of addiction.⁴³ It seemed the writer of this article knew suicide by opioids to be a slow process, when described in this manner it does appear that "suicide" could mean something more akin to what we now know as an unintentional drug overdose. In most articles, however, a motive is given as to suggest that the "suicide" described was an intentional taking of one's own life.

A pattern emerges in the shorter descriptions of suicide by opioid. Articles often include, aside from a mention of the opioid consumed and the age, sex, and occupation of the deceased (their race, national origin, or religion were only mentioned when not White, Anglo, or Christian), a description of recent financial or romantic hardships are often given. In one instance, a woman's opioid overdose is followed with the mention that her husband and son had died accidentally several years before.⁴⁴ R. B. Swain, a businessman and former Superintendent

⁴⁰ "Suicide of an Editor," *New York Times*, May 20, 1866.

⁴¹ "Suicide of a Brooklyn Physician."

⁴² "Casting Off Life's Burden," *New York Times*, June 5, 1884.

⁴³ "The Alarming Increase of Suicides," *New York Times*, August 3, 1859.

⁴⁴ "Singular Suicide of a Woman," *New York Times*, January 23, 1872.

of the United States Mint, San Francisco Branch, was found dead "...from an overdose of laudanum, supposed to have been taken by mistake. He had not been successful in business operations of late" the *Times* printed.⁴⁵ Another suicide, a Cincinnati doctor, is said to have succumbed to "disappointment in love and intemperance," but giving no further reason to suggest his death was not unintentional.⁴⁶ It seems, then, that the fact that society men, doctors, and business men were dying of opioid usage that this alone may be the rationale to declare their deaths suicides and it was, quite possibly, the job of the coroner to connect the dots accordingly and the *Times* to report it as such.

By contrast, only two of the 235 of the articles printed before 1900 noted an overdose death due to habit or addiction to opioids (though the term "fiend" was used, not "addict"). A few articles from 1901 to the end of 1909 included mention of addiction, one specifically because the woman (a nurse) was attempting to seek treatment for morphine addiction when she became comatose at Bellevue Hospital.⁴⁷ Overdose deaths called suicides appear to be on the decline, but other contexts persisted – these included accidental poisonings, mislabeled apothecary bottles, and in the case of one Dr. Edward Vanderhauf, "opium poisoning" . Another victim of "opium poisoning."⁴⁸ Another victim of "opium poisoning," the son of a prominent Tammany Hall member, Herbert Croker was found dead on a train, leading to the accusation and interrogation of "a negro" named Charles Woodson, said to have placed a helpless Croker on the train in Kansas City. Woodson explains that Croker asked that he be helped to find an "opium

⁴⁵ "California.: Death from an Overdose of Laudanum," *New York Times*, June 16, 1872.

⁴⁶ "Cincinnati.: Suicide of a Physician."

⁴⁷ "Nurse's Sudden Death," *New York Times*, April 13, 1903.

⁴⁸ "Mystery in Doctor's Death," *New York Times*, February 7, 1903.

joint,” for which Woodson assented, this leading to his untimely death.⁴⁹

If suicide was not the cause, this does not mean that these cases were caused by opioid addiction. It is also worthwhile to remember the role of other potential causes of an unintentional overdose of opioids. Consider, for instance, the role of druggists and apothecaries in the way in which 19th Century Americans consumed medical advice and treatment – far from the professionalized medical science of today, doctor and patient were somewhat equally met in terms of the perspective on who has more authority in treatment.⁵⁰ Self-diagnosis and administration, pseudoscience, and the massive disconnect between what medicine was in the 19th Century as opposed to what it is today all factor into a rationale for reinterpreting suicide as the presumed cause of death. The *Times* played a part in proliferating questionable medical advice as well – reprinting in one article a doctor’s advice – suggesting small dosages of morphine, amyl nitrite, and strychnine alongside the use of leeches and dry cupping for prophylaxis and muscle spasms resulting from heat stroke.⁵¹ The detailed reprinting read like professional advice and was given freely and without caveat to the newspaper’s readership. During this period, “blue pills” were expected to contain approximately 33% mercury and was used to treat common ailments such as constipation before mercury was known to cause heavy-metal poisoning – likewise, various preparations of opium were used to relieve a variety of ailments including diarrhea, rheumatism, as a liniment for minor sprains and contusions, cough, nausea, stomach cramps, “hysteria,” to sooth colic in a baby, and pains after childbirth among

⁴⁹ "Herbert Croker Dies on a Train in Kansas," *New York Times*, May 13, 1905.

⁵⁰ Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, *Dr. Golem: How to Think About Medicine* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵¹ "How Sunstrokes Should Be Treated," *New York Times*, June 30, 1908.

many other uses.⁵² It should, therefore, be considered that a great many people may have been taking multiple different opioid preparations at the same time for various reasons and, under their own recognizance, overdosing to treat multiple ailments.

Post Script

The first years of the 20th Century signal a transition in the way opioids were dealt with by the American public. Years of Temperance campaigns and petitions had promoted opium alongside liquor as vile and in need of prohibition internationally.⁵³ America had shifted away from a permissive and laissez faire stance on opioids to one of outright panic, especially regarding opioid use among Chinese immigrants and Black men in the United States and Filipino and Hawaiian natives in the territories – Temperance Movement declarations and the writing and lobbying of physician Hamilton Wright promoted strict laws on opium through xenophobia, fearmongering, and exaggeration.^{54,55} Aside from his fearmongering crusade, Wright served as United States' Opium Commissioner, representing America in a 1909 conference in Shanghai, China – the first in a many years long process of changing the world's Western-controlled opium trade from multi-market distribution to solely for medicinal purposes. The several conferences that followed had varying impacts, that is until an opium control provision was placed in the Treaty of Versailles, thereby creating a unified and global set of directives governing opium sale and importation. America had been a forerunner in this process, individual states passing laws before the Congress banned the sale of opium (and all its derivatives) except for “medicinal

⁵² Harvey Wickes Felner and John Uri Lloyd, *King's American Dispensatory* (Eclectic Medical Publications, 1983).

⁵³ "A Unique Temperance Crusade," *New York Times*, May 6, 1895.

⁵⁴ "Miscellaneous Notes," *New York Times*, March 24, 1867.

⁵⁵ Booth.

purposes.”⁵⁶ It was temporarily unclear to doctors at the time whether the prescription of opioids for addicts would thus constitute a medical need. The Harrison Act of 1914 and the Supreme Court in 1919 that finalized its legal interpretation provided clarification by way of criminalizing prescribing opium and declaring addiction to be a vice.⁵⁷

It was at this point, media portrayals of illicit opioid usage, overdose, and death started to resemble what it would be for the rest of the 20th century. Periodic drug panics, were followed by arrests of illegal drug smugglers and dealers, editorials and public interest often followed by an ebb in coverage. Suicide by opioid, seemingly so prevalent in the second half of the 19th Century, ceased to be a major media narrative in America.

⁵⁶ "Opium Barred after April 1," *New York Times*, March 28, 1909.

⁵⁷ Booth.

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