Opiate vs. Opioid: What's the Correct Term?

A recent opinion piece in the Columbia Journalism Review argues that the distinction matters.

October 9, 2019 By Casey Halter

When it comes to talking about the United States' ongoing battle against heroin, prescription painkiller and fentanyl addiction, what's the correct term: opioid or opiate?

A recent opinion piece in the Columbia Journalism Review makes a strong case for the latter—upending years of reporting and editing from some of the nation's top journalistic outlets. Penned by freelance copy editor Mike Laws, the article centers on an important debate among the medical journalism and advocacy communities.

Laws begins with a quick summary of the two suffixes in question. The ending -oid, according to Webster's Dictionary, means "resembling; having the form or appearance of." On the other hand, the ending -ate, as in opiate, refers to substances that literally consist of the drug opium, derived from the poppy plant. Following this logic, opiates are drugs that originate from the poppy, whereas opioids are synthetic drugs that simply mimic the drug's chemical structure and narcotic effects.

"When we speak of 'the opioid crisis,'" Laws writes, "we are not limiting the discussion to full synthetics like fentanyl or methadone. We are speaking of the full spectrum, which includes the morphine-based pharmaceutical class, the morphine-based street-drug class and, yes, these true opioids."

To Laws, the word opiate seems more suitable because it addresses more of the drugs that are contributing to the country's addiction and overdose crisis—not just the synthetic ones. He also claims that the term opioid may be unintentionally "minimizing the culpability" of the doctors, clinics and hospitals that contributed to the crisis by promoting synthetics as a safer alternative to drugs such as heroin.

However, many researchers and medical journalists disagree. According to the National Alliance of Advocates for Buprenorphine Treatment the term opioid is now used by most advocates and medical providers for the entire family of opiates including natural, synthetic and semisynthetic drugs.

In this more widely used sense, the term opioid is more inclusive than the term opiates––which is why it has gained such traction among community groups and news outlets.

For our part, we're going to keep using the term opioid. However, the debate is an interesting one that raises questions about how we think about and address America's very real ongoing addiction crisis.

To learn more about the U.S. opioid crisis and its effects, click here.

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