



Congressional Neuroscience Briefing
Tuesday November 19, 2019
Rayburn Gold Room 2168

The Role of Science in Overcoming the Opioid Crisis



1From Left to Right: Sarah Timm, Dr. John Mariani, Dr. Wade Berrettini, Karen Korfmann

On Tuesday, November 19, the American Brain Coalition, American College of Neuropsychopharmacology, and American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry hosted a briefing; “The Role of Science in Overcoming the Opioid Crisis” in the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, DC. The briefing featured three esteemed speakers who are experts on the opioid epidemic.

The first speaker, Dr. Wade Berrettini, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, explained the chemical structure of opioids, specifically focusing on fentanyl. Dr. Berrettini noted that fentanyl’s structural uniqueness from other opioids such as heroine and oxycodone contribute to it being substantially more dangerous. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, two out of three drug related overdose deaths involve an opioid. He indicated the first steps to solving this epidemic is addressing the cultural stigma around addiction and understanding that opioid addiction is a chronic relapsing brain disease that requires long-term treatment, supplemented by counseling.

The second speaker was Dr. John Mariani, Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons and Research Psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Dr. Mariani discussed the history of fentanyl and its usage, explaining that it was originally developed in the 1960s, but its production temporarily stopped because pharmaceutical developers deemed it too dangerous. Dr. Mariani noted that the medical community does not fully understand the chemical properties of fentanyl that make it so dangerous, but he did say that the majority of users are exposed to it through contaminated heroine, and therefore many of its users have already developed an opioid addiction. Finally, Dr. Mariani emphasized the importance of developing a new treatment for fentanyl addiction, rather than dealing with it in the same way we would with other opioids.

The final speaker was Karen Korfmann, a patient advocate and registered nurse at the Recovery Centers of America, who spoke on behalf of herself and others who have been personally affected by the opioid epidemic. Ms. Korfmann shared a powerful personal story of the human toll on her family of the opioid epidemic and the loss of her husband to an opioid overdose. As a registered nurse working in the recovery field, she sees many families and patients struggling to deal with the powerful effects of opioid addiction and honored the courage it takes to seek treatment. Her own experience with her husband's opioid addiction highlighted its powerful grip, the associated shame and stigma, and how a fatal overdose impacts a family and a community long after the addiction has taken its ultimate toll.



Sarah Timm, Executive Director of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology, moderated the briefing, and opened it up to questions from the audience, which was comprised of House and Senate staffers, as well a number of individuals representing member organizations of the American Brain Coalition.