

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 162, No. 145

Serving Chicago's legal community for 161 years

Curse of the athlete: Painkillers help but also hurt

Former Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre first pulled back the curtain on one of professional sports' darkest secrets, when he publicly admitted that "playing with pain and injuries and because of numerous surgeries, I became dependent upon medication."

Thousands of professional athletes have since fallen into that same trap. Some have overdosed on prescription pain pills and died. Others continue to deal with powerful addictions borne from athletes' innate desire to remain in the arena and fight through the pain.

Sometimes, "playing through the pain" leads to something more than ice baths and grit — that is when athletes turn to opioids.

Opioids are synthetic versions of opium. Examples of opioids are oxycodone (sold under the name brand OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin) and Percocet. These are readily available to professional athletes. Because opioids cause euphoria, their use has been associated increasingly with misuse and abuse.

Unfortunately, the problem of pain-pill misuse is increasingly present in all professional sports.

As succinctly stated by an NHL official, "these players in the '80s and '90s used to take alcohol or cocaine to cope with the emotional toll of fighting night after night. Things became much worse in the 2000s ... Now they take pills ... pills to sleep ...

pills to wake up ... pills to ease the pain ... pills to amp up." Document labeled NHL0155220-1; Produced In Re: National Hockey League Players' Concussion Injury Litigation, MDL No. 14-2551.

Corboy & Demetrio represents plaintiffs in the NHL litigation.

A recent study of retired NFL players revealed that more than 50 percent of players took pain pills during their career. Of those, 71 percent admitted to misusing the medications during their careers.

More than a dozen former NFL players instigated a class-action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California against the 32 member clubs of the NFL, challenging the league's administration of painkillers. *Evans, et. al. v. Arizona Cardinals Football Club LLC, et. al.*, No. 3:16-cv-0130.

The plaintiffs allege that the NFL's team doctors and trainers provided players with painkillers in an effort to quickly return players to the game rather than allow them to rest and heal properly from serious injuries.

Judge William Alsup denied the defendants' motion to dismiss on July 1, allowing that case to proceed into discovery of the NFL's practices regarding the administering of prescription pain pills to its players.

But the prevalence of the problem is not limited to those players coping with painful injuries sustained in pro sports.

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While professional athletes may have easier access to larger quantities of painkillers, the risk of opioid abuse exists for athletes competing at lower levels as well.

According to a USA Today report, of the approximately 7.5 million high school athletes in the nation, 25 percent will sustain a sports-related injury each year. These athletic injuries often precipitate use of the habit-forming prescription opioids.

A study from the University of Michigan revealed that by the time high school athletes become seniors, 11 percent will have used a prescription opioid for non-medical purposes. Likewise, a study published in the Journal of Drug Education revealed that approximately one-third of athletes competing in the NCAA believe there is nothing wrong with using painkillers to cope with the pain associated with

competition.

In addition to being a danger in itself, the misuse of prescription painkillers may be a gateway to a drug that is even more deadly — heroin. According to findings by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 80 percent of all heroin users in the U.S. began using heroin after abusing painkillers like Percocet, Vicodin and OxyContin.

Further, the National Institute of Drug Abuse also found that one out of every 15 people who use prescription opioids non-medically will try heroin within the next 10 years.

Recognizing that serious sports injuries may require the use of opioids for pain management, it is equally necessary for athletes, and those connected to the athletes, to appreciate the risks of opioid abuse.

Although some sports injuries may be career-altering, inappropriate pain management can be life-altering.

To reverse the epidemic of opioid drug overdose deaths, efforts to improve safer prescribing of prescription opioids must be intensified.

In addition, those already addicted and dependent on opioids must be protected from overdose and provided readily available access to medication-assisted treatment, in combination with behavioral therapies. This epidemic can be, and must be, stopped.