

Inside the Prescription Drug Epidemic Through the Experiences of a Neonatal Nurse

A Florida neonatal nurse details the impact of the prescription drug epidemic of the early 2010s and her efforts to fight it in a new book called STOPPNow.

Janet Colbert was a neonatal nurse during the height of the prescription drug epidemic in South Florida in the early 2010s. She witnessed babies born addicted, and the proliferation of the so-called “pill mills” that stole many lives and broke apart countless families.

Exhausted by what she was seeing, she thrust herself into activism. She and other mothers began protesting outside these centers and pushed for legislation to stop the over-prescribing of powerful painkillers and other drugs.

She details her successes and failures in a new book called STOPPNow.

A longtime friend of NOPE Task Force, we interviewed Janet and asked her to explain her reasons for writing the book. We also focused on what can be done to end the current opioid epidemic.

1) What is your book called? When was it published?

Janet Colbert: The book is STOPPNow (Stop the Organized Pill Pushers) Now. The book is newly published. I received the author copies on Monday, August 28 2017.

2) What is the book about?

Janet Colbert: The book is about the opiate epidemic that had its origin for our nation in Broward County, Florida where I reside. I was a neonatal intensive care nurse at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital in Broward County taking care of infants born suffering from withdrawal. I learned of the pill mills that were proliferating Broward County -- 150 pill mills just in our county, more than McDonald’s or Starbucks locations. After writing letters to Tallahassee that did not result in too much of a change, two other mothers and I began holding peaceful protests outside the pill mills. These mothers, many times, were protesting in front of the very clinic that caused the death of their children. There would have been some level of understanding if they threw a brick through the plate glass window. But we always obeyed the laws in place.

3) Why did you write the book?

When STOPPNow was started in early 2010, there were 7 deaths a day in Florida. Today there are 14 deaths a day in Florida. I have been to Tallahassee and Washington DC. People there are not listening. There was a so-called Senate Investigation with letters written to the drug companies on May 8, 2012. The allegations were many regarding payments from the drug companies. This is who should be standing on the Senate Floor answering questions. The public doesn’t know and we need a louder voice. There was a bill entitled S. 799 Protecting Our Infants Act of 2015 that passed into law. I’d like to share Sec. 2. Findings. Congress finds as follows:

(1) Opioid prescription rates have risen dramatically over the past several years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in some States, there are as many as 96 to 143 prescriptions for opioids per 100 adults per year.

(2) In recent years, there has been a steady rise in the number of overdose deaths involving heroin. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the death rate for heroin overdose doubled from 2010 to 2012.

(3) At the same time, there has been an increase in cases of neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). In the United States, the incidence of NAS has risen from 1.20 per 1,000 hospital births in 2000 to 3.39 per 1,000 hospital births in 2009.

(** The above is not in the book but this is the environment I have seen throughout. We need action. They could end this.)

When I was trying to get legislation passed in Florida to mandate the PDMP, I had a legislator tell me that if I don't have the approval of the Florida Medical Association (FMA), she could not sponsor such a bill. Why are any of these people in office?

4) What is your background and qualifications for writing the book?

I never had any intention of writing a book or of taking up this cross. I could not, though, ignore the babies I was caring for. In writing to politicians, I would write if you don't care about this human life, think about the cost to our state and government. Many of these babies are in the intensive care unit for months. The NAS baby utilizes all of the disciplines. They require RN's to administer medications to help them through withdrawal usually morphine and clonidine. The RN is also responsible for scoring the symptoms using a scale to determine the outcome of what is being prescribed. Physical therapy is also needed to help them with their extremely tight limbs, and speech therapy is needed to help them towards nutrition. Often, they are in too much of a frenzy to have the ability to place the bottle in their mouth and create a vacuum in order for them to suck. Even more services are needed -- pharmacists for the medications and neonatologists to order, based on the scores, the medications.

The infants' problems, starting with being born addicted to drugs, does not end upon discharge. Many are discharged to Child Net to start the rest of their lives in the foster care system. Florida Department of Children and Family Services is also completely overwhelmed and often called out too late to save a child being cared for by a caregiver suffering from substance use disorder (SUD). And I haven't even touched on how affected I am by a parent who has buried their child.

5) What is your connection to NOPE?

I met NOPE Executive Director Karen Perry very early on. I used to say she was trying to stop the demand part of the equation and I was trying to stop the supply. We have kept in touch periodically throughout the years. We are both dedicated to stopping the opiate epidemic that has caused such suffering for so many. We have shared our frustration in not being able to have laws enacted to prevent this from happening to another family. The CDC guidelines should be instituted into law.

6) What can be done to overcome our nation's opioid epidemic?

We have law enforcement and the DEA, and that is all we have. It has often been said that we can't arrest our way out of this. My take on that is that we need legislation. The BOM also does not take away licensure from most of the high prescribing doctors. The latest ME report for the state of Florida 2015 states that deaths caused by oxycodone increased by 20.2% when

compared with 2014. This is a physician prescribed ep

I went to Tallahassee this year. I tried to amend HB 557 to include limited opiate prescribing during the acute phases of an illness to 5 days. One legislator told me that we live in a drug society and that I need to change our society. I am asking him to help save lives in our state and this was his answer to me. I did, however, find Representative Cary Pigman. He told me that he thinks I am right and he would help Representative Duran write the amendment. I

spoke before one of the house committees and HB 557 did pass the house.

On Good Friday, Senator Jeff Clemens of West Palm Beach deleted that portion of SB 840 (companion bill to HB 557) so we do not have limited opiate prescribing in Florida with the deaths increasing to 14/day and the NAS babies escalating as well.

I was in Washington DC for the Fed Up Rally on August 31, 2017. I visited Senator Marco Rubio's office and Senator Joe Manchin's office. I am asking them all to support S. 892. This bill is limiting opiate prescribing to 7 days for states that do not have a measure in place -- namely Florida.

Here is the link to the book on Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Stopnow-Stop-Organized-Pill-Pushers/dp/1480975621/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1505312723&sr=8-1&keywords=STOPPNow