

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4804

December 21, 2015

The Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell,

As the senior Senator from West Virginia, I have seen firsthand the devastating effects of prescription drug abuse on individuals, families, and communities in my state, and I believe strongly that we need to do everything we can to stop this epidemic. One critical step that we must immediately take is to encourage the responsible prescribing of opioids. This is why I and many of my Senate colleagues have expressed strong support for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Draft Guidelines for Opioid Prescribing, and why I am very disappointed that these guidelines are being delayed.

The CDC very recently released alarming new statistics that show that there was a 16% increase in the number of prescription-opioid related deaths between 2013 and 2014. 18,893 people died in 2014 due to prescription drugs; that's 51 people dying *every day*. Since 1999, we've lost almost 200,000 Americans to prescription opioid abuse. This is an epidemic that requires all Americans to unite in order to stem the tide.

Given these numbers and the human toll they represent in West Virginia and around the country, I am frustrated that the CDC has decided to delay the release of these guidelines. I am particularly disturbed by the role that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) played in this decision to delay. At a recent meeting, the FDA's Director of the Division of Anesthesia, Analgesia and Addiction Products, Sharon Hertz, was one of the strongest voices against the guidelines. While the President of the United States, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and every other agency of the federal government has been actively working to save lives and stop this epidemic, the FDA is working against these efforts and further endangering the public.

In 2013, health care providers wrote 207 million prescriptions for prescription opioid painkillers, almost quadruple the number written in 1999. This is enough for almost every American to have a bottle of pills. According to the CDC, this increase has come without a corresponding increase in reported pain, but it does correspond with a 400% increase in overdose deaths. Still, the FDA continues to approve ever stronger and more dangerous opioid medications, including Zohydro. It is appalling to see an FDA official actively work against an effort intended to clarify that these are dangerous drugs that must be prescribed carefully.

The CDC's draft guidelines represent a reasonable, commonsense approach to help doctors take into account the very real and prevalent danger of addiction and overdose death when prescribing opioids.

They will help us reduce opioid addiction and diversion and save lives without compromising access to needed treatment.

As the CDC moves forward with the prescribing guidelines, I hope that you and all of HHS will stand behind the CDC in pushing for the strongest possible set of recommendations to help end prescription opioid abuse and overdose deaths. Too many people in our communities are losing their lives, families, and futures to prescription opioids. We must not delay or weaken our efforts to help them.

Sincerely,



Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator