

Gormley's Take: Novel Treatments for the Opioid Crisis

Companies aim directly at source of pain to deliver therapies



By

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Startups are devising painkillers that could ease the opioid crisis, which is killing thousands of Americans and leaving millions of others addicted to drugs.

More than 90 Americans die each day from [opioid](#) overdoses, while up to 29% of people prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Opioids are effective when used appropriately. But as new treatments become available, doctors will be get better at matching patients with therapies well-suited to their condition, said Tom McCarthy, who led pain-drug startup Spinifex Pharmaceuticals Inc. to a 2015 merger with Novartis AG.

One trend is to avoid the addiction risk that opioids present by developing treatments that don't affect the brain. Spinifex's oral drug for post-herpetic neuralgia—a painful condition seen in some people who have had shingles—doesn't enter the central nervous system, Dr. McCarthy said.

Others apply therapy directly to the source of pain. Cleveland-based SPR Therapeutics LLC is introducing a treatment that uses electrical impulses to stimulate nerves and relieve pain in the back and extremities. Patients wear the device for 30 days, but SPR

has seen relief that lasts months to years after it is removed, Chief Executive Maria Bennett said.

Centrexion Therapeutics Corp. is developing a pipeline of non-opioid medicines, including CNTX-4975, which is injected into the painful site to inactivate fibers transmitting pain signals to the brain.

The Boston company, led by former Pfizer Inc. CEO Jeff Kindler, is testing this drug for knee osteoarthritis in humans and dogs and for a rare foot condition, Morton's neuroma.

A decade ago concern about opioids and other systemic pain-relievers was much lower, said Danguole Altman, CEO of Vapogenix Inc., a Houston-based developer of topical medicines for wounds and other painful conditions. Amid the opioid epidemic, attitudes have changed.

“Unlike five or 10 years ago,” Ms. Altman said, “there’s much [more] understanding that having locally acting solutions really makes a lot of sense.”

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