

STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY  
OxyContin: Balancing Risks and Benefits  
Tuesday, February 12, 2002

Today's hearing focuses on OxyContin, a prescription painkiller that has been a miracle drug for some and caused tragedy for others.

OxyContin has helped tens of thousands of patients with cancer or other unbearably painful diseases perform the everyday tasks of life. Without this drug and those like it, these patients would suffer needless pain and find the simplest of daily tasks beyond their abilities.

At the same time, abuse of OxyContin is hurting individuals and families, and tearing apart communities. Across the country, small towns and cities alike have been unprepared for this epidemic of illegal abuse and addiction. Many have never seen such a crisis before, and are unable to provide essential drug treatment and counseling services. They want our help.

Since March of 2000, over 280 people have died from OxyContin abuse. Children have been neglected by drug-addicted parents.

Nursing homes and pharmacies have been held up at gun point. In my own state, already this year, 19 pharmacies have been robbed. In areas where OxyContin is abused, crime has skyrocketed.

We must find ways to address the abuse of OxyContin while preserving access for those who need it. I hope that this hearing will allow us to learn more about the benefits and risks of this drug, and identify creative approaches to help us address the epidemic of its abuse and the abuse of other prescription drugs.

For example, I understand that employing novel drug safety strategies could have helped public health authorities identify and anticipate the abuse of OxyContin well before it became a national problem.

I thank Senator Reed for his leadership on this issue, and for chairing this important hearing today. And I thank Senators Warner and Collins for calling this epidemic to our attention last year, and in recommending today's hearing.