Addiction science and policy requires a broader lens: Comment on Volkow & Collins' The role of science in addressing the opioid crisis

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Abstract

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To the Editor: The recent article by Volkow and Collins (1) stresses the necessity and importance of public-private collaboration in addressing the opioid crisis (and the addiction problem generally). The authors outline an agenda for short- and long-term research and development, emphasizing overdose prevention, new addiction treatment strategies, and nonaddictive treatment alternatives for persons experiencing chronic pain. While in principle such innovations would play an important role in advancing addiction treatment, such scientific and therapeutic optimism remains unfulfilled and is largely speculative. As it stands, the development of such treatments (e.g. gene therapies; addiction vaccines) remains a hypothetical goal, resting on a contentious theoretical orientation (i.e. addiction as illness/brain disease). (2,3) Public-private collaborations, in addition to exploring this particular biomedical line of inquiry would benefit from embracing a more biopsychosocial treatment model; (4) one that acknowledges the various bio-physiological, cognitive-behavioral, and social-contextual factors that contribute to and sustain addictive processes. Such an approach would endeavor to parse out the weight each factor contributes (e.g. a personal history of trauma; family history of drug use; social deprivation) to addictive behavior and if/how such factors would be causally linked (presuming a causal relation is in fact the appropriate frame for understanding the development of addictive behavior). This shift would truly exemplify the “all hands-on deck” approach advocated for by Volkow and Collins, retaining both a rigorous scientific orientation to the problem and maintaining the agential role of the individual in their own recovery. (5)

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