

US Justice Department arrests over 400 in health care fraud crackdown

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17 July 2017

Last Thursday, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) announced it had charged 412 people across the country with crimes related to health care fraud and opioid abuse, which, the agency claimed, cost taxpayers \$1.3 billion. Among those arrested were 56 doctors who were charged with inappropriately prescribing opioids and other crimes.

The DOJ's announcement highlighted a number of what it said were fraudulent operations, pointing to six doctors in Michigan who allegedly prescribed unnecessary opioids, a fake rehab clinic in Palm Beach, Florida that used various incentives to lure addicts, and a clinic in Houston, Texas where doctors allegedly wrote painkiller prescriptions in exchange for cash.

The Trump Justice Department's focus on doctors and health clinics is designed both to soothe public anger over the failure of the government to address the opioid epidemic and distract attention from the main culprits in the drug crisis—pharmaceutical companies such as Purdue Pharma and Insys, which misleadingly marketed opioid painkillers to doctors, and drug distributors such as McKesson and Cardinal, which flooded communities with opioids in collaboration with pill mills.

Without an expansion of access to addiction treatment, the crackdown could actually worsen the epidemic, forcing addicts to switch from the painkillers prescribed by pill mills to more dangerous alternatives such as heroin or fentanyl. A report by the US surgeon general issued in November of last year found that only 10 percent of drug addicts in the United States receive any treatment for their addiction.

The DOJ released a statement by US Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Noting the human cost of the opioid epidemic, Sessions laid the blame on "trusted medical professionals like doctors, nurses and

pharmacists [who] have chosen to violate their oaths and put greed ahead of their patients," and "seem oblivious to the disastrous consequences of their greed."

"We will use every tool we have to stop criminals from exploiting vulnerable people and stealing our hard-earned tax dollars," Sessions added.

The hypocrisy and cynicism of Sessions are underscored by his support for the Republican health care plans working their way through Congress, which would slash or eliminate health coverage for tens of millions of working class, poor and elderly people in order to bolster the profits of the insurance giants and finance massive tax cuts from the rich. The Republican House and Senate bills to "repeal and replace" Obamacare would have deadly consequences for those suffering from drug abuse, gutting Medicaid and eliminating requirements that it cover addiction services and mental health care.

Members of the Trump administration have dishonestly claimed that the focus on Medicare and Medicaid fraud is aimed at strengthening these programs. Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, for example, stated that President Trump "instinctively understands the importance of saving and strengthening Medicare and Medicaid."

In fact, the Republican health care bills would slash more than \$770 billion from Medicaid over 10 years, impose spending caps and effectively end the program as a guaranteed benefit for all those who qualify.

Sessions is seeking to revive the war on drugs, including the failed DARE program, which never had the goal of treating drug abuse, but instead provided a pretext for mass incarceration, the rollback of democratic rights and other attacks on the working class. To oversee the DOJ's criminal division, he has

named Kenneth Blanco, who concentrated on drugs and violent crime while serving as chief of the narcotic and dangerous drug section at the Justice Department.

At the same time, the DOJ has reportedly gutted its Health Care Corporate Fraud Strike Force, shrinking it from five full-time lawyers to only two, according to an article on the web site law.com.



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