

Pharmacy School Cost and Opioid Dispensing: A Hidden Connection?

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Abstract

The opioid crisis in the United States has reached unprecedented levels, but little is known about the role of pharmacists. Using large-scale data from pharmacists' online job profiles linked with data on opioid dispensing at the pharmacies where they work after graduation, we investigate how the financial burden of pharmacy education influences their career choices and subsequent dispensing behaviors. We compare opioid dispensing quantities across pharmacists from institutions in the same county but with different tuition costs. First, we show that pharmacies dispensing more opioids tend to provide higher wages. Second, we find that even among pharmacies in the same county, pharmacists from higher-tuition institutions are more likely to work at pharmacies with higher opioid dispensing. Lastly, we demonstrate that the positive association between pharmacy education costs and opioid dispensing is stronger among pharmacists who are in their first two years post-graduation, male pharmacists, and those working in areas with more severe prescription opioid use. Our findings suggest that pharmacists from institutions with higher tuition, who likely face greater student debt, may be more inclined to work at pharmacies that dispense larger quantities of opioids due to financial concerns.

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