Ohio Sues Drug Makers, Saying They Aided Opioid Epidemic

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA  MAY 31, 2017

The State of Ohio filed a lawsuit on Wednesday against the pharmaceutical industry over the opioid epidemic, accusing several drug companies of conducting marketing campaigns that misled doctors and patients about the danger of addiction and overdose.

Ohio's attorney general, Mike DeWine, sued the drug makers in a case similar to one that was filed by Mississippi in 2015 and is still pending. In another case, West Virginia went after major drug distributors and has reached settlements that will pay the state tens of millions of dollars. The City of Chicago, and counties in New York, California and West Virginia, have all started litigation.

Complaints like these are being closely watched by state and local governments around the country that are trying to decide how to proceed — decisions that are complicated by differences in state laws.

“We are in ongoing discussions with attorneys general about what can only be described as a national epidemic,” said Michael P. Canty, a lawyer in New York whose firm, Labaton Sucharow, is advising states on possible opioid litigation.

In 2015, more than 25,000 people in the United States died in 2015 from overdosing on opioids like fentanyl, oxycodone and hydrocodone, more than twice as many as a decade earlier, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The drugs, either derived from opium or synthetic analogs of
those narcotics, now kill more Americans than homicide, and are approaching traffic accidents as a cause of death.

Middle-aged white men suffer disproportionately from opioid abuse, and the states with the highest overdose tolls are Ohio, Kentucky, New Hampshire and West Virginia.

The drugs were once used primarily for acute, or short-term pain, but over the last two decades, doctors have increasingly prescribed them to treat chronic pain, giving them to patients for months or years at a stretch. Drug makers promoted that change, Mr. DeWine charged in his suit, spending “millions of dollars on promotional activities and materials that falsely deny or trivialize the risks of opioids while overstating the benefits of using them for chronic pain.”

In addition, he said, the companies provided funding to prominent doctors, medical societies and patient advocacy groups to win their support for the drugs’ use. By 2012, the suit says, opioid prescriptions in Ohio equaled 68 pills a year for every resident of the state, including children.

Defendants in the case include Purdue Pharma, Teva Pharmaceutical Industries, Johnson & Johnson, Endo Pharmaceuticals, Allergan and others.

Purdue, the maker of OxyContin, a time-release opioid, released a statement saying, “We share the attorney general’s concerns about the opioid crisis and we are committed to working collaboratively to find solutions,” and calling the company “an industry leader in the development of abuse-deterrent technology.”

Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the leading industry group, said it would not comment on litigation involving specific companies.

Ohio’s lawsuit seeks to recover money the state has spent on the drugs themselves, through programs like Medicaid, and on addiction treatment. States took a similar approach in suing the tobacco industry in the 1990s, which eventually led to settlements worth more than $200 billion.

A version of this article appears in print on June 1, 2017, on Page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: Ohio Sues Drug Makers Over Opioid Crisis.