Privately held drug company Purdue Pharma LP said it would stop promoting OxyContin and other opioids to doctors, 22 years after the painkiller linked to widespread addiction hit the U.S. market.

The company will continue selling the products, but Purdue's sales force “will no longer be visiting offices to engage in discussions about opioid products,” such as OxyContin. Many public-health officials have linked the drug to a widespread opioid-addiction crisis. PHOTO: TOBY TALBOT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Jeanne Whalen
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The company will continue selling the products, but Purdue’s sales force “will no longer be visiting offices to engage in discussions about opioid products,” the company said, confirming an earlier report by Bloomberg. Doctors and other prescribers who have questions about the drugs will have to contact Purdue’s medical affairs department, the company said.

Purdue is also cutting its U.S. sales force by more than 50%, to about 200 people. The remaining sales representatives will market non-opioid products, said the Stamford, Conn.-based company.

Many public-health officials have said Purdue’s aggressive marketing of OxyContin after the drug’s 1996 launch helped encourage lax prescribing and widespread addiction that for many people progressed to heroin and other illicit drugs. More than
300,000 Americans have died from opioid overdoses since the late 1990s.

In 2007, Purdue and three of its executives pleaded guilty in federal court to criminal charges of misleading the public about the addictive qualities of OxyContin. Purdue and the executives agreed to pay $634.5 million in government penalties and costs to settle the civil litigation.

In its guilty plea, Purdue admitted the company's sales tactics included false claims that OxyContin was less addictive, less subject to abuse and less likely to cause withdrawal symptoms than other pain medications. Within a few years of the drug’s launch, many communities around the country started reporting worrying rates of OxyContin-related abuse and overdose deaths.

Purdue has since said it has “learned from the past,” and that it supports programs to prevent prescription-drug abuse.

Purdue’s halting of its opioid marketing comes as the company faces growing legal scrutiny. More than a dozen states and about 400 cities and counties in the U.S. have sued Purdue or other opioid-painkiller makers, accusing them of fueling addiction by misrepresenting the risks of their drugs. In response to the suits, Purdue has said it is “dedicated to being part of the solution” to the opioid crisis.

In October, Purdue said it was the subject of a probe by federal prosecutors related to OxyContin. The company said it was cooperating with the investigation.

In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued guidelines urging doctors to limit their prescribing of opioids for chronic pain. Since then, Purdue’s opioid-related discussions with prescribers have included details about the CDC recommendations, the company said.

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