

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Opioids Are a Problem in the Green Industry

Jack Payne



Last year, FNGLA's Ben Bolusky and Ed Bravo came to us with a challenge. It wasn't a horticultural problem or a pest issue. It was a social problem.

There's a good chance you've seen it in your own operation. An applicant does great in an interview and then fails a drug test. An employee shows up clearly under the influence of a drug.

Anecdotes are powerful illustrations of a problem like opioid abuse. But if your information is entirely from your own experience, it's hard to know if what you're going through is representative of a broader problem.

You need science to measure the extent of a problem. Ben and Ed approached the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Associate Professor Heidi Radunovich to see if she could determine if the anecdotes pointed to a larger truth.

This is another reason we respect Ben and Ed so much as industry leaders—acknowledging your industry may have a problem that comes with a social stigma takes honesty and courage. To actually fund a study to shine a scientific light in dark places requires humility and a powerful drive to make things right.

Even if Dr. Radunovich had concluded there's nothing to see here, Ben and Ed deserve credit for calling in the scientists. But she concluded there is something very important to see here.

Heidi's work indicates opioids are a problem in the green industry—just as they are in so many places and sectors of America. What Heidi did was give you data to back your observations.

Her scientific survey revealed more than 70% of respondents in the nursery and landscape industry have used opioids, and a nearly identical percentage reported opioid addiction. Those percentages are nearly triple the rate even in other sectors of the agricultural industry.

The fallout in agriculture, overall, according to nursery/landscape and other agricultural respondents:

- 54% had opioid-related work absences
- 46% quit or were fired due to use
- 67% were injured at work while using

Why so many? This couldn't be adequately answered in a survey. Heidi hopes to explore this through qualitative methods, such as interviewing people directly. With a better understanding of causes, experts can better develop responses to manage or prevent opioid abuse.

Opioid abuse isn't just a nursery and landscape problem; it infects every corner of society. Because UF/IFAS is so connected to researchers in other disciplines, Heidi was able to secure additional funding from the Southeastern Coastal Center for Agricultural Health and Safety. (It runs largely on federal grants.)

Ben often speaks of the three-legged stool of industry, academia and government; it's what supports the land-grant mission. We're all in this to solve problems together. We're at the unpleasant stage where we're documenting the scope of the problem, but we will look for the resources to determine the "why?" and to guide the "what is to be done?" **GT**

(Editor's note: This piece was originally published in the Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association e-newsletter.)

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