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MS Panel Urges Tougher Penalties for Opioid Sellers

By **Crime and Justice News** | August 4, 2017

The Mississippi Governor's Opioid and Heroin Study Task Force is recommending some of the toughest measures in the U.S. to fight the opioid epidemic, [the Jackson Clarion-Ledger reports](http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/08/03/task-force-life-sentences-heroin-fentanyl-dealers/536417001/?hootPostID=020e9fab7108b3a926cc76832d5db907) (<http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/08/03/task-force-life-sentences-heroin-fentanyl-dealers/536417001/?hootPostID=020e9fab7108b3a926cc76832d5db907>). "Physicians had a role in creating the problem, and physicians need to have a role in solving it," said the group's vice chairman, Dr. Randy Easterling. While doctors don't relish the idea of others telling them how to practice medicine, "it boils down to adapting your practice and changing the way you treat acute and chronic pain," he said. Drug overdose deaths surpassed 52,000 in 2015, and deaths in 2016 could be as high as 60,000, more than the members of the U.S. armed forces who died in the Vietnam War.

The task force is recommending tough punishment for drug dealers who sell heroin or fentanyl, an enhanced sentence of 40 years to life. Easterling, who also serves on the state Board of Medical Licensure, said regulatory boards have agreed to require health care providers to put the task force's recommendations into practice. Health care providers would be required to check a Prescription Monitoring Program before prescribing a Schedule II opioid or benzodiazepine for acute or non-cancer pain. The panel warned providers against prescribing opioids with benzodiazepines such as Xanax, he said. "That's a deadly combination." The report encourages pharmacists to work closely with providers, and when a pharmacist suspects "doctor shopping," he or she should contact the provider.
