

**United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Hearing
“Current Issues in American Sports, Protecting the Health and Safety of American Athletes”
May 17, 2017 Testimony – Maureen and Jeff Deutscher, Sioux Falls, South Dakota**



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and our insight regarding Opioid use as it relates to the effect on our young athletes in our home state of South Dakota and around the country.

In our 30 years of marriage, my husband Jeff and I have been blessed with 3 wonderful children, Jeremy, Nick and Annie.

Today we are here to tell you about our son, Nick.

Kind, funny, happy, uplifting – these were some of the words used in memory of Nick by friends and family following his death on July 18th of 2015.

We would add smart, intuitive, adventurous, frustrating and amazing! Another recurring theme, “Nick always had your back”, a true and loyal friend.

We’re just a regular Midwest family gathering for meals, enjoying family vacations and celebrating special occasions together. Jeff and I have supported our children in their education and activities as religious ed leaders, room parents, coaches and club leaders. Nick had positive role models in extended family, teachers and coaches. Our parenting style, as we would describe it, is consequence when called for, praise and always love and we all take care to be there for one another.

So what happened? What did we miss in protecting our son? This has been our daily reflection for the past 21 months and 29 days.

We would like to share with you some of Nick’s journey through the last four years of his life.

Nick excelled in academics and athletics. Nick had many and varied friends. Nick was a bit of a risk taker, always up for the challenge.

Nick’s experience with Opioids began shortly after his 18th Birthday in the fall of 2011 with his MCL/ACL injury - second play of the second game Senior Year as a starter with his High School State Champion football team. Then the prescribed Hydrocodone and Percocet (Oxycodone) – through the partial tear, rehab, back in play for the last game of the season and subsequent surgery for the full ACL tear.

As though it were yesterday, we recall driving to Walgreen’s pharmacy directly from the game field for the first of a series of prescriptions. I personally maintained possession and control of Nick’s Opioid prescriptions for Nick’s welfare, but my understanding of the risks associated with the medication did not even scratch the surface.

An alarm went off in November when Nick indicated the Hydrocodone was no longer sufficiently addressing his pain. We shared this information with his orthopedic staff, were told they were not concerned with the progression and Percocet was prescribed over the phone without further evaluation.

Following recovery and rehab from surgery through December of that year, the prescriptions abruptly ceased.

Beginning in January, it became very clear that Nick was struggling. He underwent counseling and through our physicians, alternative medications were prescribed to help with the withdrawal culminating with 30 days of residential treatment. Still, Nick graduated with his class as a Regents Scholar. No stranger to hard work, Nick made it through that very frightening and challenging time, all while under the care of excellent physicians and all with the continued love and support of his family and the support of his high school’s principal, coaches and staff.

For the next 3 years Nick attended college classes and worked, but the disease had taken hold and did not retreat as he continued to struggle, protecting us, his family, as best he could from the fear of what could happen to him and the frustration at not being able to diminish the symptoms of Addiction.

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Still good, kind and fun Nick continued to share with us his hope in recovery.

The symptoms of Addiction can move a person in directions they do not want to go and often do not comprehend. That happened to Nick as he found himself faced with charges stemming from substance use in 2014. Nick knew what to do, ask for help. We were blessed to have been able to support him through his work with Tallgrass Recovery in Sioux Falls in two 30 day stays between October 2014 and March 2015. Coming home in March was a young man renewed in his recovery, attending meetings, getting together with his sponsor, going to church, working and spending time at Tallgrass.

On May 20th of 2015 we attended Nick’s sentencing hearing for the 2014 offences and on June 3rd Nick checked into the work release program with Minnehaha County for just under four months.

July 18th brought a visit by the Sheriff’s Department at our home at approximately 8:30 p.m. Nick had died in his sleep, having returned to the work release facility after work at approximately 3:30 that afternoon, spending time with others in the program and laying down for a nap. Nick died an accidental death. Reports indicated prescription medications in Nick’s system, all but two prescribed – one of which was Oxycodone, at an elevated level. Nick was 21.

From what we can discern through conversations with Nick’s friends and investigative findings, Nick likely relapsed due to the stress of his situation. We believe the medications were intended by Nick for use as a coping tool and to aid in sleep at the corrections facility. But as all too many parents, family members and friends across the nation are learning every day, for some people, Opioids have their own intentions.

We can no longer experience the joy of Nick’s laughter, awesome hugs and genuine goodness. What we hope to accomplish here is to reinforce the need for careful consideration of the effects of Opioid therapy in the management of injury as our young athletes press forward to perform, to highlight the responsibility of Medical Professionals in prescribing practices relating to Opioid pain medication and to reinforce the need for education of the public on the Addiction risks associated with the use of Opioid therapy in sports injury management. In our experience with Nick, the Addiction hit swiftly and without retreat, reinforcing that Addiction is a Chronic Disease.

Over the past 21 months we have had meetings and conversations with county and state appointed and elected officials, members of the medical and legal communities and judicial systems and agency directors in the very misunderstood field of Addiction and Recovery.

Jeff and I have provided testimony at our state’s Legislative Study on Substance Abuse Prevention and are currently serving on the SD Governor’s Opioid Abuse Advisory Committee.

Through all of the conversations and meetings there are key issues that rise to the top for Jeff and me:

1. The risks of Addiction to Opioid medications and the risk of that leading to further addiction(s) are seriously misunderstood and understated.
2. The prescription Opioid issue begins with just that – a prescription – calling for responsible prescribing practices and distribution monitoring.

As parents, Jeff and I feel our most important role in life is to protect our children...if only we had known then what we know now....

In closing, we are grateful for the current work being done to address the issues at hand. Now, we ask for your thoughtful consideration of the information we have provided, experience gained through our journey with our son, Nick.