

Shelly Whittaker kept going back to the doctors. They kept telling her there was nothing wrong with her son. But she knew better.

In 2007, when the boy was born, the Fort Collins, Colorado, woman was already raising a daughter who would grow up to be a straight-A student. But she became pregnant with her first son, her doctors decided to treat her two serious medical conditions – lupus, and rheumatoid arthritis – with Purdue Pharma’s widely used painkiller, OxyContin. When her first son was born in June 2007, he yawned constantly, and his body shook.

“We took him to the doctor, and I said, ‘I don’t know what’s wrong,’” Whittaker recalled. “They said, ‘He’s fine – we don’t know what it is.’”

She continued to experience problems with the child, including vomiting and other symptoms of withdrawal after she stopped breast-feeding a year later. But her doctors never suggested she stop taking OxyContin or other prescription painkillers, even when she became pregnant with her second son who was born in March 2010.

What happened next followed a familiar pattern. Whittaker’s second son -- who spent a week in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, and received morphine to withdraw from opioid dependency – exhibited many of the symptoms of neonatal abstinence syndrome, or NAS: High-pitched crying, tremors and convulsions, diarrhea and vomiting, and difficulty swallowing. When Whittaker became pregnant with her third son in 2013, her doctors switched her to a different medication, Subutex – which didn’t prevent the boy from developing all the same signs of NAS.

A dozen years later, as Whittaker works tirelessly to raise three boys with ongoing behavioral and developmental difficulties, the 38-year-old Colorado woman minces no words when it comes to either the drugmakers who so aggressively marketed their products or the doctors who seemed clueless about the risks.

“I am frustrated with the doctors who kept shoving these pills down my throat and telling me that everything would be fine,” Whittaker says today. But she’s also come to learn that the pharmaceutical giants who made and marketed those pills knew more about the addictive risks than they let on to the public. “It makes me sick to my stomach,” she adds.

Whittaker is hardly alone. Lawyers advocating for children like hers believe that as many as 750,000 children have been born in the United States with NAS or with birth defects, lingering developmental difficulties or other problems caused by in-utero exposure to opioids. Whittaker recently became a plaintiff in one of the more than 34 class action lawsuits filed across the nation on behalf of NAS babies, with the goal of ensuring that medical care, damages and the creation of a medical monitoring fund are paid by the firms that created the crisis.

Like other mothers of children with NAS, Whittaker said there’s a whole array of unmet needs for these kids. “I would love for them to have some help with their schooling,” she said. “There’s no school in my community that helps children who’ve been falling behind.