

Population Health NEWS

Thought Leaders' Corner

Each month, *Population Health News* asks a panel of industry experts to discuss a topic suggested by a subscriber. This month, there are two questions.

Q. How can population health initiatives combat the opioid crisis?

If you haven't turned on the news, read an article or even more disheartening, had a loved one overdose on drugs, you may not be aware of the opioid crisis in the United States. In 2017, approximately 47,600 persons overdosed on opiate class drugs, according to the CDC. How did we get here? And more importantly, how can we help?

I think one of the most important things we can do to help ensure that everyone is educated on the opioid crisis, is to simply get the word out that it is ok to ask for help. Opioid addiction is not a moral failure. It is a disease. If your son or daughter is sick, you take them to the doctor. If that same son or daughter breaks his or her leg on the playground, you take them to the emergency room. If your spouse is complaining of chest pain, you rush him or her to a specialist or emergency room. Why is it, if our loved one is using heroin or narcotic pain pills that we suffer in silence? We do not love them any less; we just may not understand the urgency or depth of this deadly disease. We want them to get help and to come out on the other side healthy and happy again. So, with that in mind, what can we do?

Understand that no one wakes up and decides to be an opiate addict. It starts in a variety of ways, often times very innocently. A student athlete injures his knee and has surgery. The pain is horrific, no doubt, but he takes more of the pain pills than he should. It is not easy to stop. A mother has a C-section with complications. She loses her baby and is dealing with grief and the pain from the complicated caesarean. She takes a few more pain pills each day to get through the pain.

In both scenarios, a loved one has to step in and ask for help. We also have to be willing to receive the help that will save them. There are a variety of treatments options available for opiate addiction. Medications such as Methadone, Buprenorphine and Vivitrol are some of the most researched and evidence-based ways to treat this disease. Medications can help manage the symptoms of withdrawal that often leads to relapse and helps the patient engage in other treatments.

I've worked in the field of opiate addiction for 25 years and I still have loved ones and friends who suffer in silence. In a world full of pressure to be the perfect parent, partly due to the pressures from social media and corporate America, it is hard for us to admit our little worlds or our precious children, spouses, parents, cousins, close friends, are not perfect. What I can say, is educate your children early. Let them know it is not ok to take a pill from a friend at school. Make sure you do not keep leftover narcotics from a surgery or injury in your possession. There are places to drop off pills at most law enforcement agencies across America. Do not take the chance that those pills end up in the wrong hands.

The difference between today and 25 years ago is that drugs are being manufactured with deadly substances. All it takes is one "bad batch" and your loved one could be gone. Know the facts. Know the signs. Know how to get help. Narcan, a reverse agent, can save a life from overdose and is available by prescription and often times over the counter. If you think your loved one is using, ask your physician for a prescription. Learn how to administer it and be prepared.



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