

Abuse of prescription opioids on the rise in Gratiot County



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The Alma Police Department recently held a training session open to call Gratiot County law enforcement officers regarding opioid addiction and how to administer Naloxone in the event of an overdose. It was taught by Dr. William Morrone, Bay County medical examiner and medical director at Recovery Pathways. Officers are now equipped with a Naloxone kit supplied free by Morrone with a grant he secured.

away,” she said.

And that’s how and why some people fall into addiction. An athlete suffers a painful injury. An older adult undergoes surgery. Prescription medication softens first the pain, then life’s troubles.

Data from the Michigan Automated Prescription Systems, or MAPS, shows in 2014 Gratiot County had more opioid prescriptions dispensed than there were county residents.

County population per U.S. Census in 2014 was 41,665. Opioid prescriptions numbered 43,543. This was 10,450.74 per 10,000 population.

These numbers reflect prescriptions written only in Gratiot County and only residents receiving prescriptions.

The MAPS system is a prescription monitoring system with a central database accessible to authorized persons such as law enforcement agencies and [health](#) professionals. The system tracks the number of prescriptions written by medical doctors and filled at pharmacies.

Once prescriptions for painkillers like Oxycontin or Vicodin cease however, an addict searches for a substitute. Local law enforcement officials attest the rise of heroin addiction is attributed to opioid addiction. It’s the same high and heroin is cheaper.

Heroin is considered a poor man’s drug “because it is so cheap to make and easier to get,” said St. Louis Police Chief Richard Ramereiz.

The 29 year-old works in a professional career, all the time as a “functioning addict,” unbeknownst to her co-workers.

**by Rosemary Horvath
For the Herald**

The friendly voice of the 29 year-old woman on the phone couldn’t cloak a sense of despair.

Respecting her request for anonymity, she recounted the headache migraines she had “every day in high school” that led to a daily dose of the over the counter Acetaminophen sold as Tylenol.

After numbing to the Tylenol, a physician prescribed a potent pain medication for her.

“Take one and the stomach pain goes away. Take two and the emotional problems go

Five years ago, she went to a methadone clinic where the opioid analgesic is dispensed to those who abuse heroin and other opioids. They are weaned off the opioids.

The woman also attends two different support groups, one in Gratiot County, that functions similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program. She seeks and finds camaraderie at both.

“Drugs don’t discriminate,” she said. An addict can be wealthy, poor, young or old, and from no particular ethnic group.

Regardless from which walk of life, an addict has to make a serious commitment for recovery, if there’s any chance of beating the stranglehold, she believes.

And that’s one of the drawbacks, she said. When a person decides to go for treatment, they need to begin treatment immediately, and not be put on a waiting list. There just aren’t enough treatment programs or affordable residential rehab centers to counter the number of addicts.

“I wish there was a magic wand, and you’d be better,” the 29 year-old confided.

Sheriff Doug Wright attests to the shortage of detox programs because of the number of drug addicts he sees arrested and jailed.

“There are many people we arrest who go through detox on their own while in jail,” he said. “We have medical personnel on duty but not for detox which can be terrible pain. They have sweats and pace back and forth coming down off a high. When they get out, they do the same thing again.”

The sheriff added “There is a problem here and it affects a lot of good people.” Around the time of the March interview with the 29 year-old, lawmakers at the state and federal levels grappled with finding solutions to curbing the spectacular rise of painkiller and heroin abuse nationwide.

The U.S. Senate passed the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act created to combat the growing epidemic, but legislation has languished in the House. In Michigan, an abuse task force led by Lt. Gov. Brian Calley at the direction of Gov. Rick Snyder implored lawmakers to provide solutions, some of which is found in the Senate legislation.

They want to provide easier access to Naloxone, a drug that reduces the effects of an opioid overdose, limit criminal penalties for low-level offenses for those who seek medical assistance with an overdose, increase access to care through wraparound services and Medication Assisted Treatment programs, require additional training for professionals who prescribe controlled substances, review successful drug takeback programs for possible replication and expansion, increase the number of addiction specialists practicing in Michigan, eliminate doctor and pharmacy shopping, require a bonafide doctor-patient relationship for prescribing controlled substances, create a public awareness campaign about the dangers of prescription drug use and abuse, increase training for law enforcement in recognizing and dealing with addiction for those who do not deal with narcotics regularly.

Gratiot County has taken steps to hit many of the targets.

A county substance abuse coalition under Child Advocacy, composed of health professionals and community members, has sponsored programs to educate the public.

One such program took place at Alma High School on May 11 where local experts talked about prescription opioid abuse. Besides Child Advocacy, sponsors were Community Mental Health, Substance Abuse Coalition, Mid Michigan District Health Department and MidMichigan Health that are pooling their resources to reach out.

The Alma Police Department recently hosted a two-hour training on opiate overdose and Narcan training. Officers from departments in Alma, St. Louis and Breckenridge participated. Dr. William Morrone, medical director at Recovery Pathways and Bay County medical examiner, led the training and equipped officers with a kit free of charge, paid for through a grant.

Each participant now is trained to administer Naloxone in the event of an overdose or suspected overdose, Lt. Kendra Overla, Alma Police Department, said.

Ty Warczinsky, substance abuse prevention coordinator for Gratiot County, has spearheaded many of the educational community programs, in collaboration with other agencies. He said these and other prevention programs offer a bright spot.

“People are seeing how many lives are ruined that they are willing to take action. The bright spot is we are trying to educate people. There is collaboration among agencies. I see more push and support behind this movement.”

Area physicians and nurses on prescription opioid abuse. Dr. Morrone who presented the program also discussed the limitations of medical marijuana. There are now four prescription drop boxes. These receptacles are for unused, unwanted or outdated medications, and available at the sheriff's department lobby, open 24 hours 7 days, and police departments in Alma and St. Louis, open weekdays at normal business hours.

Warczinsky added the state and national exposure has been helpful to call attention to this issue. “But we still have a long way to go because it is such a huge problem.”