

Time to get serious about heroin epidemic



SINCE relocating to the Wyoming Valley three years ago, I've learned hard realities about

drug abuse, especially the heroin epidemic that has seized the region. Now able to identify those students who use heroin, I've come to realize that the drug does not discriminate.

One of my brightest and most promising students is struggling to reclaim his life. He has not only done prison time, but has been in and out of treatment for three years and is still not clean. Sadly, his story is not uncommon.

Heroin abuse is rising in Pennsylvania as the market for the drug has expanded from urban areas to midsize cities and smaller towns across the state. Here in Luzerne County, heroin is as accessible as cigarettes, costing about \$20 a bag. Some of the dealers are natives who sell heroin to support their addiction. Other dealers come from New York City and Philadelphia and prey on our young people.

Heroin, which can be snorted, smoked or injected, is highly addictive. The initial high is quickly followed by a downward emotional spiral. What begins as a casual experiment for some users soon becomes a hard dependency that robs the individual of his personality, the ability to think clearly, or to find enjoyment.

Fentanyl-laced heroin, which has been circulating in Wilkes-Barre since April, is even more dangerous. Known on the street as "Dracula," "Nike," or "get high or die tryin'," the concoction is 80 times more potent than morphine and can be fatal in large doses.

COMMENTARY

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The state Bureau of Drug and Alcohol indicates that heroin users younger than age 25 are the fastest-growing user group. They delude themselves into believing they can handle heroin. They can't.

Although addiction depends on dosage and frequency, the symptoms are the same. One former user, who was hooked on 10 bags of heroin a day, described her use as a "full-time job."

"You wake up in the morning and you have to get high before you get out of bed," she said. "If I couldn't get the stuff, I'd go into withdrawal. My mind would race and my skin would feel like it was cracking and my bones like they were breaking."

Recidivism is extremely high. "Young people relapse more often than older users because of their feelings of invincibility," said Dr. Nicholas Colangelo, director of Clear Brook Inc., a local treatment center.

"In many cases, they go into treatment for the wrong reasons – family pressure, legal problems or some immediate crisis. Once that reason is gone, they return to using. They're simply not willing to make the life change that's necessary to stop the use."

Unfortunately, users have to hit rock bottom before they stop. In the process, they not only ruin their life, but family members' lives as well.

If we are serious about stopping the heroin epidemic, we must do more. Here are four steps that can make a major difference in the fight against

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heroin:

- Press for tougher sentences on drug peddling. Currently, depending upon his previous record, a pusher can receive an average sentence of 10 to 20 years in prison at the state level, or 30 years to life at the federal level. Lengthen the average sentence and couple it by making peddlers pay restitution to the families who've lost loved ones to drugs.

- Lobby state and federal representatives to increase funding for rehabilitation programs and treatment centers that are already overburdened.

- Increase funding for research to find a cure for heroin addiction.

- Institute mandatory community service programs where middle school students visit treatment centers to learn about drug addiction firsthand from the users. Pre-adolescence is a critical stage in the fight against drugs because many youngsters start using around age 12 or 13.

It's easy to dismiss the heroin epidemic by blaming users' parents or the users unless one's life has been affected by this terrible drug. Heroin addiction is an illness and most of the users are victims of unscrupulous dealers.

What's more, they are young people who spell whatever future our society has. Unless we help them now, the future can only be a bleak one.

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