



**Wednesday, March 15, 2017**

## **Panelists Urge More Attention, Funding For Opiate Addiction**

With opioid overdoses now leading automobile crashes as a cause of death in the state, policy makers and citizens in general need to pay more attention to the issue and dedicate more resources to it, a panel of medical experts, law enforcement officials and activists said Wednesday.

Any policy changes need to start from the view that opioid addiction stems from physiological changes, not from weakness or ill intent, and that it takes a long time to break, if ever, said panelists convened by the Michigan State University Institute for Public Policy and Social Research.

As a start, physicians need to be retrained in prescribing oxycodone, hydrocodone and other opiates. But there also needs to be stiffer sentences to deter illegal dealing in the drugs, the panelists said. The public also needs to be open to discussing the issue and remove the stigma of addiction, the panelists said.

David Neff, a member of the Michigan Osteopathic Association's committee on opioid addiction, said there are no commonalities among opioid addicts. It affects a wide swath of the population.

"The longer you're exposed to an opioid, the greater the risk that you alter the neurobiology and the larger the likelihood you won't recover even after a period of abstinence," Mr. Neff said. And he said most are first exposed through a prescription to combat pain.

He said the urgency to address the issue is increasing because the death toll is increasing. Statewide, there were 1,762 overdose deaths in 2014 and 1,980 in 2015.

Lisa Gee-Cram, commander of the Jackson Narcotic Enforcement Team for the Department of State Police, said in her county, opioid-related deaths increased from 20 in 2014, and 48 percent of overdose deaths, to 37 in 2016, and 71 percent of overdose deaths. That compared to traffic death counts ranging from 17 to 20 over the three years.

A first step, in the state and nationally, is changing prescribing practices, Mr. Neff said. "There's more medicine being prescribed that is legitimately explainable," he said, adding doctors and public health officials need to find the right balance between treating pain and preventing addiction.

For those who are addicted, there needs to be better and longer-ranging treatment plans.

Mike Hirst, founder of Andy's Angels, named after his son who died from a heroin overdose, said his son had gone through detox programs a number of times and had been out only a few weeks when he died.

"Most of the people who go through a two-week facility are pretty much using the day they get out," Mr. Hirst said. "That's just the very first step in the journey."

Jed Magen, chair of the MSU Department of Psychiatry, said studies show that those who have gotten off the drug perform better in normal life situations the longer they are clean. But under stress, those clean for years perform little better than those who have been clean for a couple of weeks, he said.

"That is not any more a choice, that is a neurobiological phenomenon," he said of those who return to the drug when they are under stress. "That accounts for why these things are chronic problems."

Mr. Magen and Mr. Hirst said those in the community have to pressure funding sources, public and private, to cover the longer-term needs of addicts.

"I can show him where they're wasting money," Mr. Hirst said of the insurance plans that will cover only the short-term detox programs.

"Since the Medicaid expansion, many more people have gotten drug treatment," Mr. Magen said, arguing that any federal or state plans to end the expansion will also mean an end to those treatment programs.

Ms. Gee-Cram said the state also has to develop disincentives to illicit dealing.

Mr. Hirst said his son, and many other youth in his community, got their initial drugs from a man on disability who was selling his excess medication.

Heroin has become a very profitable drug as the addiction to it has grown, Ms. Gee-Cram said. A street-level dealer can turn a \$6,000 purchase into about \$25,000 in sales, more if the heroin is mixed with other chemicals.

"This is about money," she said. "These dealers are predators. And they after some very vulnerable targets."

But she said most dealers receive probation because of the small amounts they carry and, because of the organizations involved, it is very hard to make arrests higher up the organization.

"I feel like a gerbil on a wheel sometimes," she said. "We can't cut the head off the snake on this one."

The department has been trying to work on the demand end, though, Ms. Gee-Cram said. The Gaylord post has a pilot underway that allows any addict to come in and ask for help without fear of arrest.

And statewide, State Police posts are accepting used medications for destruction, she said.

**FEDERAL LAW:** [U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell](#) (D-Dearborn) and [U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg](#) (R-Tipton) announced Wednesday that they had reintroduced federal legislation, Jessie's Law, which would give doctors access to a patient's addiction history to aid in treatment plans.

The proposal is named after Jessie Grub, who was an Ann Arbor resident and recovering drug addict. She was prescribed an opioid and overdosed on it because her doctor did not know of her addiction history.

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