

Confronting the Heroin/Opioid Epidemic in Pennsylvania

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Drug Overdoses are increasing rapidly throughout the nation, including right here in Pennsylvania. Overdose touches our friends, family and our community for which we live and love. One day, last August Washington County reported 18 overdoses on one 24 hour period which resulted in 3 deaths.

This past year Monongahela Valley Hospital with the assistance of our emergency services participated in multiple training sessions teaching first responders the procedure of giving nasal naloxone to overdose patients for immediate treatment on scene. The use of nasal naloxone has saved the lives of several patients in our own community since start of this new procedure which we are very proud. Training was provided to first responders, local police and at local school districts by training administrators and school nurses.

We all know that prevention programs are very important to fight the war on drugs, however addressing drug and alcohol addiction as a **disease** and getting immediate resources to the overdose patient has shown to help with the recovery. Offering the treatment and recovery immediately after an event can help these patients transition to healthy and productive life.

The concept of a warm hand off policy is an initiative where by our emergency healthcare providers, nurses and social workers have the resources to offer survivors of overdoses immediate hand-offs to the appropriate drug and alcohol services once they have been medically stabilized. The staff at Monongahela Valley Hospital Emergency Department have participated educational sessions to help direct patients to speak with our colleagues at the Washington Drug and Alcohol Commission (WDAC). There are several staff members including case managers and recovery specialists that work directly with our facility our patients can be referred to.

The warm hand off policy attempts to get patients to treatment to get the help that they need straight from the emergency department. Many times with substance abuse, the first step of obtaining help is the offer of help. Patients need to understand that left untreated, their addiction can be deadly. Understanding addiction as a disease and that by getting treatment will save their life needs to be the message reinforced. The conversations held with these patients are very fragile and at times difficult. Having trained experts to deliver these difficult messages in a way that the patient knows that we are caring for them and want to save their life is an important part of this initiative.

It would be optimal to have counselors and specialists available to offer round the clock counseling for these patients once they have recovered. These specialists would encourage the patient to participate in drug and alcohol treatment and help get them immediate care. The goal is to assist the overdose patient to have a direct plan in place or have the appropriate treatment options and resources offered and provided before they leave the emergency department.

The warm hand off policy gives patients that are publically funded and have no ability to pay for their treatments the ability to be tuned in to the resources needed to enter treatment. Most insurance companies cover drug and alcohol treatment. Insurances offer different types of treatment and specific facilities are covered. Washington Drug and Alcohol Commission, Inc. (WDAC) is the agency that we refer patients to help those without any type of insurance. Face to face screenings and phone screenings are provided by WDAC by completing a short questionnaire to identify the needs of the patient and then set the patient up for treatment. Our emergency department discusses these options with the patient individually to help them seek treatment. The client's willingness to change their lifestyle is a very important factor in starting their treatment, the warm hand off policy can help facilitate this.

Emergency Department providers are taught to complete screenings such as the use of Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) an evidence-based practice screening tool that has proven to be effective in reducing alcohol abuse and showing great promise with respect to drug abuse as well.

Our Emergency Department at Monongahela Valley Hospital also follows the pain management guidelines provided by the state of Pennsylvania for prescribing and dispensing pain medication. The ED providers are trained in best pain medicine practices as well as identifying drug abuse and addiction problems in their patients, and make referrals for treatment.

Immediate treatment offered to overdose patients in emergency settings using the **warm hand off policy** can help patients with opioid and heroin addiction recover and become productive members of our community again. Saying yes to help when you have just survived an overdose is a key time to make the decision to change your life.

We are in the business to save lives and by offering drug and alcohol treatment to the patients this disease affects, we hope to change the lives of these individuals one patient at a time.