

Methadone clinics treating hundreds around area

Directors say outpatient facilities having positive effect on community

Jeffrey Alderton

Cumberland Times-News

CUMBERLAND — Nearly three years after opening its methadone clinic, the Allegany County Health Department treats 70 to 75 patients.

"Sixty-nine percent of our patients are in the 20-to-39 age bracket. Our population tends to come from lower-income population, including employed, unemployed, disabled. We have quite a mix, with half of them female and half male," said Jim Brenneman, director of outpatient addiction services.

The clinic operates six days each week for dosing, and patients can earn take-home doses by being free of illicit drugs and attending treatment counseling appointments.

"By and large, the program has gone very well. I shared some of the apprehension of the community when it first started," said Brenneman, who began his career in 1984.

"I can see how we are providing help, and it's a viable program. My impression is that the number of heroin- or opiate-related arrests and deaths locally have dropped. Whether or not that is due to the presence of our opiate-based treatment programs I can't say. But it appears these kinds of incidents have decreased,"

The program has a waiting list of 15 people seeking to enroll in it.

For many years, there was no significant opiate problem in the community.

"That number, however, skyrocketed in 2003 and 2004. We had to re-think and re-do our treatment approach. The outpatient treatment models we were using were not effective and so we had to take that into consideration and adapt our strategies," said Brenneman.

Methadone treatment, he said, is not used only for heroin addiction. "Half of the people in our treatment program are here primarily because of problems with prescription opiates.

"These are people who, over time, have become addicted to prescription medicines. It's important for the public to understand that this program is not only for the stereotypical heroin-injecting drug user.

"I don't think people understand the addictive features of these pain medications. People need to be cautious and aware of the possible side effects," said Brenneman.

Discussions are continuing by Dr. Sue Raver, Allegany County health officer; the department's Substantive Abuse Prevention Unit; Brenneman; and other health department officials to find ways to "increase public awareness to the dangers of prescription medicine drug abuse," he said.

In LaVale, approximately 150 people are patients at the Cumberland Treatment Center Inc. on National Highway, with about 60 percent of those suffering from heroin or other opiate-based addictions. As one of 60 such treatment centers operated nationwide by CRC Health Group Inc., the facility can handle up to 300 patients.

A staff of 10 people, led by clinic director Bill Dick, operates the facility six days a week since it opened in July 2006. Although it may be thought of as a methadone clinic, Dick stresses that it is not that.

"We use methadone as a tool to treat opiate-addicted patients as well as suboxone in treatment to addictions ranging from heroin to pain pills. We also treat alcoholic patients and drugs associated with that addiction," said Dick.

"Most people look down on methadone because it is an addictive drug also. But what we have here is a maintenance-to-abstinence program. We use methadone to stabilize them. When they come in, they are sick and down and out. Some can't seem to get better without a stabilizing drug such as methadone," he said.

Patients get involved in individual, family and group counseling to help them become motivated to overcome their addictions. They enroll in 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous as part of their support system.

"The longer a person stays in treatment, the more successful they are in overcoming their addiction. Addiction is a lifelong disease," said Dick.

Studies show, Dick said, that there is an 80-percent success rate for people enrolled in maintenance drug-based program more than 11 months. Typically, after 12 months of treatment, patients use the next six months for detoxification, with drug dosing gradually reduced down to nothing. Those patients then remain in counseling for six months.

"Usually during this process, a person has gotten a job, support of their family and they become a whole person. They didn't want to become addicted in the first place and then they become a productive person and an asset to themselves, their family and to society," said Dick.

The treatment center works closely with primary-care physicians, families, the court system, Department of Parole and Probation and mental health facilities to coordinate treatment programs to ensure that patients are receiving optimal care.

A monitoring program and urinalysis, with every patient tested randomly at least once a month, are part of the treatment. Patients given take-home doses may be called to bring back the next-day dose to verify compliance with program guidelines and requirements.

"We do a lot of good and I think we save lives. We're doing a big part in helping to keep crime down. We are helping individuals and families. We've never had any negative feedback from the community," said Dick.

Patients are charged \$12 per day for treatment, physical examination, weekly checks by treatment center physician and weekly counseling.

Any patients unable to comply with the prescribed program are referred to either intensive out-patient treatment or entering an in-patient program.

"Addiction is the degradation of our society," said Dick.

In Cumberland, there are 130 clients being treated at Western Maryland Recovery Services on Bedford Road for all types of opiate addictions, according to Herb Howard, program sponsor.

"Our clients come from all age groups, all segments of society and some are multigenerational," said Lezlie Reinhart, program director.

Howard believes his treatment center is contributing to the community in a positive way.

"I think we have made a difference. We're helping to reduce crime by helping people to deal with their addictions. We make their addictions and their lives manageable," said Howard, who also operates a treatment center in Montgomery County.

Both Howard and Reinhart detailed positive results of their program, including a local man who overcame his addiction to physician-prescribed pain medication.

"He was here for two years. He came here thinking he could do this in two months. There was nothing that made him happy.

"Two years later, he has gained weight, he is feeling good and feeling productive. He has also made lifestyle changes to reduce his pain and he has taken a holistic view of his life," said Howard, who noted that addiction is "very indiscriminate."

"Ten percent of the population can be addicted to some kind of drug," said Howard.

Reinhart said eating healthy and exercise are vital to good health.

"Feeling good is part of recovery, eating right is part of recovery, exercise is part of recovery. We are rebuilding the whole person," said Reinhart. "When people come in here, they are trying to get a second chance. Not all of us get that."

Howard added, "It takes time to get messed up and it takes time to get cleaned up. But it's possible."