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News

Battling opioid addiction

By **Laura McCutcheon**

The number of Americans who will die of drug overdose this year is projected to surpass the casualties from the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined, according to Dr. Jeremy Ernst at Marshall Medical Center, who said about two-thirds of those deaths will be opioid-abuse related.

On a daily basis more than 90 Americans overdose on opioids, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. It's no wonder it's been declared a national public health emergency.

"Locally, in El Dorado County, there are about a dozen deaths a year due to opioid abuse and overdose. Many, many more people will require emergency care and hospitalization due to overdose," Ernst said.

Numerous area agencies and individuals are working together and independently to raise awareness and resources to address the issue. Recent Community Health grants from the Marshall Foundation provided substance abuse education totaling over \$32,000 to local organizations seeking to make a difference. Help went to grass roots organizations like Bipolar Insights for classes addressing self-medication, illegal drugs and problems with drug addiction.

"Dual diagnosis is a very common and challenging concern for mental health," Ernst said. "People struggle with treatment if both issues are not adequately addressed. This issue is increased if patients have underlying pain issues that the opiates help treat, even if inadequately. As chronic pain is a common issue it can be very depressing and anxiety inducing. Over a long period of time feeling this way becomes an issue of its own which again, is why it is important to treat the underlying issues if possible and help in whatever way we can," he said.

Another grant went to El Dorado High School to continue facilitating the Brief Intervention Program that addresses the gap between treatment need and treatment availability, as substance abuse commonly starts in late adolescence and early adulthood, according to Ernst. However, a large percentage of the elderly population is also at risk for prescription drug abuse, as this age group is the most likely to be prescribed these medications, he said.

Asked if drug addiction was higher in males or females, he said, "Men have a higher risk of substance abuse overall but women who abuse drugs have a higher likelihood of developing an addiction to substances."

El Dorado County in May joined 29 other counties in filing a lawsuit against opioid manufacturers and distributors for creating the opioid epidemic. Now part of what's called the California Opioid Consortium, the 30 county group represents approximately 10.5 million residents.

The California Opioid Consortium and its counsel have developed evidence that many of the nation's largest drug manufacturers misinformed doctors about the addictiveness and efficacy of opioids, states a press release from the county.

"In El Dorado County, more than 183,000 opiate prescriptions were written in 2016 in a county with a population of approximately 184,000 residents. The county had nine deaths attributable to opioid overdose, which is higher than the state average of 4.6 deaths per 100,000 residents. From 2008 to 2016, 87 residents died from opioid-associated overdose. In 2016 an estimated 5.1 percent of the population aged 12 and older or 9,000 people in the county misused opioids and approximately 1,600 had an opioid use disorder. In 2016 the county had a rate of 8.9 emergency department visits per 100,000 people due to opioid overdoses and 13.3 opioid overdose hospitalizations per 100,000 residents," the press release states.

Opioids are powerful pain killers that can be highly addictive, states information from the El Dorado County Health and Human Services Agency. Opioids come in various forms, including the prescription drugs oxycodone (for

example, Percocet or OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), codeine (used to treat pain or cough, such as Tylenol #3), and morphine (Kadian or MS Contin), as well as heroin and fentanyl (a powerful synthetic opioid), the information states.

“Opioids are addictive because they dramatically decrease dopamine in the reward system of the brain over time, causing constant and severe feelings of craving and withdrawal. Opioids also depress the breathing rate. During a overdose, the user can stop breathing completely and die,” the information states.

To learn more about opioids visit cdc.gov/rxawareness.

People interested in local community education and preventions services can call the Alcohol and Drug Programs of El Dorado County at (530) 621-6207.

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Tags: [A1](#), [printed](#)

