Tackling the rise of prescription drug abuse

A conference was held March 9 at the Downtown Conference Center on the Prevention and Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder. It was sponsored by Dine' Council of Elders for Peace and Synergy Behavioral Health Center.

Opioids are addictive prescription medications which include: Vicodin, OxyContin, Demerol, Percoset, Darvocet, Ritalin, and Amphetamines. Some of them are natural, derived from the opium poppy. Others are synthetic. The chance of addiction to these drugs is great.

The focus of the conference was to educate participants and the public on the abuse of opioids, and how everyone can assist people who don't understand that they are abusing these prescribed medications. Representatives in attendance were health care workers, substance abuse counselors, clinical and mental health counselors, social workers, child services, nurses, and area hospital workers.

The event began with a welcome address by Noreen Kelly of Dine' Council of Elders for Peace,

who co-sponsored the event. Kelly, who is a traditional counselor and a certified peer support worker, elaborated on how a counselor can help those suffering from opioid abuse. According to Kelly, she uses everyday life as a Dine' person, where everything is respected as positive. This approach is to teach young people about themselves, where they come from, what they do, and how to be better adults.

"Often you hear the word 'eeyah' in our culture and it typically means something scary or a taboo," she said. "There is no taboo. The main focus is prevention. We have strategies in the Native community; our own set of laws that have been carried from the beginning. With this it is helping the youth to become positive/better adults and eventually leaders in their families/communities."

Kelly says one question that is often asked is, "How do we get educated enough and to take care of this?" She says doctors and counselors also ask this question about how they can help in the Gallup area. There is a ZOOM learning project at UNM-Gallup branch, that is educating community health workers according to Kelly, as well as traditional health care workers, who also take part in this training. Kelly says her organization is working with area doctors on combating this issue.

"Prescription drug use is heavy here in the area, if only teaching and education was given for those who have prescribed them, then we wouldn't have the big use of them here. We have different people from the area on our team helping to do what we are doing."

Partnering with Kelly is Synergy Behavioral Health Center, based in Gallup. Bill Pearson, who is a therapist at the clinic offers services that range from mental health, substance abuse, and out-patient counseling. Being a part of the planning group, Pearson hopes the conference brings more understanding about the issues that the local community faces with opioid abuse. Pearson also hopes that more conferences such as this will be in the works in the next six months.

"Part of our effort here is to bring resources that the State of New Mexico makes available to the Gallup region," he adds. "A lot of the resources, the training, the continuing education for our counselors, the community outreach, and the prevention and treatment, tend to focus in urban areas, such as Santa Fe and Albuquerque. In Gallup, we would like to see more opportunities like this for the general public, and for counselors and social workers, to have continued training."

Mark Mathison, who attended the conference, was appreciative of the training. He found it helpful in keeping up to date on the topic.

Mathison said that the statistics were useful to him as a peer counselor. He said the numbers presented gave him hope. “I’m a part of Celebrate Recovery which is just like AA, which uses the Twelve Steps of AA. It’s faith-based, that is church related. We meet every Tuesday at 6:30 to 8:30 PM at Joshua Generation Church in Gallup, Zuni, and Window Rock, AZ.”

Rose Kaye, of Sanostee, who specializes in Clinical and Mental Health, found the workshop to be informing and insightful for her job. Clients that are referred to her often fall in the opioid field and according to Kaye, it’s always helpful to know more about this topic, to better deal with her clients on getting them the help they need.

“I really enjoyed it and especially the numbers discussed on the usage of opioids,” she said. “In fact, I recorded some of the speakers for their informative topics.”

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By Dee Velasco
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