

Guest Column: Drug addiction is not a choice, it's a disease

By Marie Datillo, Times Guest Columnist

Question: How many times should we save them with Narcan when they're only going to go out and do it again? Answer: Every time! Just like we would use a defibrillator every time someone goes into sudden cardiac arrest or we would use an EpiPen when someone has a severe allergic reaction or we would employ any type of life-saving measure to assist someone in mortal distress, so then should Narcan be administered every time someone overdoses.

Sadly, many people reading this will disagree. And their reasoning will be that the person experiencing the cardiac event or suffering an allergic reaction didn't "choose" to be in that situation. The person addicted to drugs, however? The widespread belief is that a person suffering from substance use disorder, known as addiction in its most severe form, has chosen to be in that situation. Most won't recognize or accept that addiction is a medical condition and not a moral failing. Most believe it's about willpower and don't recognize the science behind addiction and why choice is not part of the equation.

The belief that addiction, and especially heroin addiction, is a choice is false. Did someone choose to use a drug that first time? Absolutely. But that first drug use was typically alcohol or marijuana or a prescription pill. The first drug ingested is virtually never heroin. It doesn't work that way. Addiction isn't even on the radar with that first use. Some can try an illicit substance or a prescription pill that first time and never experience a problem. But for others, those with certain risk factors, that first time they try a drug for whatever reason or perhaps even take a prescription pill prescribed by a physician can set off a chain reaction in their brain that will ultimately take them down a path to addiction. And if they are experimenting with prescription opioid pills, that path will frequently lead to heroin.

Full disclosure – I was once one of those individuals who didn't understand the disease of addiction. I was someone who would question why anyone would ever risk their life by putting a needle filled with a drug in their body, especially if they've overdosed before and know how deadly that injection can be. Why would anyone subject the people who love them to the never-ending stress of worrying about their well-being ... wondering if they were going to live through another day ... waiting for that dreaded phone call. I used to believe they could stop anytime they wanted and were just being selfish or irresponsible by continuing with a lifestyle that generated complete and utter chaos for themselves and their families.

How much that all changed for me, though, when I lost my 22-year-old grandson Eric to an accidental heroin overdose on 06/28/14. I was forced under the most devastating of circumstances to take another look at this issue. I had to understand why we lost him and how heroin ever got a foothold in my family. I wish with all my heart that I had had this education before 06/28/14, that someone had warned our family about the danger of addiction, and heroin, in particular. If we had known more, perhaps Eric might still be alive. I can't change the past.

But I can sound the call for others to become educated on this issue to possibly save another family from the grief my family has experienced. I will mourn for Eric until the day I take my last breath. But I will not let his death have been in vain.

There will be naysayers who will never accept addiction as a disease. This letter will receive a lot of negative comments. I know that. But please, become educated about this disease and then make an informed decision about addiction as a medical condition. No one is immune from addiction. It can strike anywhere, anytime, to anyone; and trust me, you do not want it to strike your family or someone you love. But if the worst happens and it does impact someone you love, you would want that person saved every single time to give them the opportunity to recover. Because recovery is possible ... and prevention is possible. It's all about understanding the science.

Addiction is a disease of the brain. It's something an individual has, not something they do. Addiction changes the structure of the brain, altering the way in which the brain works. And those changes affect an individual's ability to make good decisions. For someone suffering from addiction, one part of the brain is screaming for a substance so they can function and the part of the brain that governs judgment and decision-making that would help that individual to know that ingesting the drug was not a good decision, that part of the brain is shut down, unable to do its job and guide that person's actions. The person addicted to heroin doesn't use the drug long term to get high. They use because the drug becomes essential to their very existence. They are way past choice at that point; their brain has been hijacked.

Whether you accept that addiction is a disease or not, please accept that naloxone (brand name Narcan) is a life-saving antidote that should be widely accessible in cases of opioid overdose. Last week, Surgeon General Jerome Adams issued a national public health advisory calling for more widespread use of naloxone. This medication can restore a person's breathing when sprayed into the nostrils, quickly bringing an opioid overdose victim from the brink of death. Those at risk for opioid overdose as well as their families and friends should have the antidote on hand and know how to use it. First responders carry this medication. It should be widely available in all public places –if there is a defibrillator available, so then should Narcan be part of that safety kit. There are standing orders in most states, including Pennsylvania, making the medication available at pharmacies without individual prescriptions.

In Delco, Key Recovery in Brookhaven offers free Narcan training and free Narcan kits funded by the Delco Office of Behavioral Health. The next session is scheduled for 05/23/18 at 7 p.m. For more information, contact Jennifer East at 484-490-1066.

Another way to help safeguard your loved ones is to properly dispose of medications. Don't keep unwanted, unused, or expired medications in your home. In Delco, there are prescription drop boxes at every police station. For a complete listing of drop box locations, see www.co.delaware.pa.us.

For those medications you keep at home, lock them up just as you would a loaded gun.

Most importantly, become educated on the disease of addiction. And the next time you hear someone ask how many times we should use Narcan to save someone from the effects of an overdose, you'll know why the right answer is "every time."

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