



New pill to help break addictions

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Across the country the misuse of prescription pain relievers, like OxyContin and Vicodin, is on the rise, and a couple of local doctors are taking part in a study to try and find a successful way to break the addictions.

Dr. John Gardin, ADAPT's Director of Behavioral Health & Research, is overseeing the local portion of a nationwide study. Its goal is to determine the effectiveness of counseling and a drug called Suboxone in helping people break their addictions to prescription medications.

When people are addicted and misusing prescriptions, they become ill when they try to stop taking them. Suboxone assists patients with detox, melting away their withdrawal symptoms and clearing their heads so they can receive further treatment, Dr. Jim Hoyne said.

Hoyne, a doctor at the Harvard Clinic, is the only physician in Douglas County who is certified to prescribe the medication for the study, and he also prescribes the pill in his own practice. Roseburg is more than a year into the two-and-a-half-year study, and both doctors are already starting to see trends among the results. Before the study began, Suboxone wasn't available in Roseburg, Gardin said.

The study is divided into two prongs. The first arm of the study is a month long and has patients taking Suboxone anywhere from one to three times a day, for two weeks, and then weans them from the drug for the final two weeks, Hoyne said.

"It's a very short trial," Gardin said. "People who fail, who go back to using, quit (the study) or don't respond are eligible to go to a 12-week program if they want to."

The longer program is considered the second prong of the study. Those patients take the pill for three months; their doses are then decreased for one month until they are no longer using Suboxone. All of the patients receive encouragement from Hoyne to seek drug counseling or to attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings in addition to taking the medication, Hoyne said.

"The 12-step recovery programs, folks that go to those do well," he said. "They have the best chance at success."

Both doctors have noticed that the short-term trial results in many people continuing to misuse prescription drugs, while the longer trial has provided more promising results. Still, Hoyne thinks it's too early in the study to determine how long patients should take the detox drug.

In Hoyne's private practice, he treats about 40 patients with Suboxone. He said most of them are using the drug for longer periods of time than the study participants. In his practice, Hoyne prescribes the drug for teens 15 years and older, while the study treats people who are 18 years and older.

Recent studies by the National Institute on Drug Abuse have shown that the misuse of drugs like Vicodin and OxyContin among eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders is slightly increasing each year. One of its 2007 studies, called Monitoring the Future, found that 5.2 percent of 12th-graders were using OxyContin and 9.6 percent were using Vicodin — up from 5 percent and 9.3 percent, respectively, in 2004. Use among eighth- and 10th-graders was up as well, but the percentages were not as high.

"It's one of the few drugs now where abuse is increasing among our high school students," Gardin said. "Marijuana, alcohol and even smoking, we're seeing declines. But with opiate abuse, it is on the rise, which is serious."

Gardin also worries that the increased misuse of prescription drugs among people of any age will lead to the abuse of other opiates, such as heroin. Suboxone can be used to help people detox from heroin also, but Hoyne said the study does not include heroin users.

"Other opiates like heroin have not been a problem here, but now we're starting to see some of that," Gardin said. "(Pills) can be more expensive; it can be 20 to 60 dollars a pill on the streets whereas heroin is a fraction of that."

For a person who is addicted to an opiate like OxyContin or Vicodin, it would be a small step for the person to turn to heroin use, Gardin said. The study will not only help people to stop misusing drugs, but will also shed light on the importance of counseling in partnership with Suboxone, he said.

Hoyne said he hopes people will start to recognize drug addiction as the disease that it is, similar to diseases like diabetes and cancer, and that the study will encourage more people to get help with their addictions.

Suboxone can be used by anyone who needs help to stop misusing prescriptions, regardless of how they got hooked in the first place. It doesn't matter if a user started taking the drug after a hip-replacement surgery or after experimenting at a party, he said.

"It's a problem on every level of society," Hoyne said. "It affects high school kids, it affects people working, the rich, the poor. It spares no class."

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