

New hope for people addicted to opioids

By IRIS HERSH Staff writer

How does a doctor wean a patient from a legally prescribed painkiller that has brought on an addiction?

Doctors are trying to answer that question through a new type of addictive substance.

Opioid dependency -- addiction to a substance that contains opium -- is a big problem that's prevalent even in rural communities such as Franklin County.

Opium, an addictive narcotic drug that comes from the dried juice of a poppy, is an ingredient in many prescription-strength pain relievers, such as OxyContin, Percocet and Tylenol with codeine, as well as heroin and methadone. This group of drugs is called opioids.

Specially trained physicians, including Dr. Bridget Hilliard of Antrim Family Practice in Greencastle, are having success in treating opioid-dependent people with a partial-opioid medication called Suboxone.

One of Hilliard's patients, a Franklin County woman in her early 20s who was addicted to heroin, tried several times to get off the drug herself.

She went to a methadone clinic for a year, but

then found it more difficult to quit methadone than heroin. While on methadone she felt tired and in a haze all the time, falling asleep during college classes. She had to go to a clinic six days a week to get her daily supply of methadone, which cost \$12 a day. She felt so ill on the drug that she returned to heroin.

Now that she's taking a drug called Suboxone, she feels well, is back at college and working. She expects to be weaned off Suboxone within six months and has lost the desire to take opioids, she said.

"The Suboxone has been a miracle," she said.

In her class at Greencastle-Antrim High School, the patient said that at least half the students had taken some sort of opioid for recreation at least once and about 10 percent of the students at the time of graduation were addicted to one of those drugs.

Research shows that unlike methadone, which is a full opioid and extremely addictive, Suboxone changes the brain chemistry on a long-term basis, Hilliard said. This gives addicts a better chance of staying off illegal opioids after stopping their use of Suboxone.

Hilliard has been prescribing Suboxone since last fall, and strongly encourages her patients to have drug counseling while taking it.

In order to prescribe Suboxone, doctors must acquire a Drug Enforcement Agency license. They do this by getting additional training about the

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chemical. Even after becoming licensed, a doctor is limited in the number of patients he or she can treat at a time, Hilliard said.

How people become opioid dependent

For half of those addicted, Hilliard said, the addiction started when they were prescribed a painkiller, such as Percocet, Vicodin, OxyContin or Tylenol with codeine. The other half initially started using the painkillers in their teen years to get a euphoric feeling.

She has talked to people who took an opioid for the first time for a migraine and got such a euphoric feeling they continued taking it because it made them feel good.

"Your body can build up a tolerance for the medication, so you need to take more to get the same effects," Hilliard said, adding extremely high levels can cause breathing problems as well as the other problems that accompany addiction. "People of any age can get addicted."

Some people can use these medications appropriately and not get addicted, but there's no way of knowing who they are, Hilliard said, adding that doctors need to monitor their patients' use of the drugs. Doctors also must be very detailed when charting why they are prescribing the medications, how much is being prescribed and if the patient is showing signs of psychological dependence, she said.

Those who have a history of substance abuse are more prone to becoming addicted to another

substance, Hilliard said.

It isn't foolproof, but Suboxone may be the best chance some people have.

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