

Opinion: An unexpected scourge

Opinion by Bob Poe

You learn a lot on the campaign trail for governor... not all of it expected.

At a recent coffee in Juneau we had an interesting mix of 40- and 50-somethings and their voter-age kids. I was meeting with this group to listen and learn about their concerns for Alaska and our future. So I asked a friend's 20-year-old daughter what her biggest issue was. She said heroin. Heroin? HEROIN in Juneau! I was stunned.

It's been a while since I thought about these things, but I do remember kids are aware of real problems affecting them way before the police, teachers, or parents caught on. If you doubt this, just think back a few years in your own personal experience.

The *Anchorage Daily News* wrote about Alaska's shift to heroin in the summer of 2008 pointing to a decline in methamphetamine arrests and a rise in heroin arrests in the Mat-Su Valley [The *Press* also wrote about the rise of heroin, in February 2007]. At the time, this information—that sadly addicted people were switching from meth to heroin because restrictions on over the counter sales of colds medicine made homemade meth less available—didn't resonate with me. But to hear these words come out of an angelic-looking young woman from a very good family stopped me dead in my tracks.

She told me that kids started with Oxycontin, a prescription opiate often prescribed to cancer patients and others who have extreme pain. But Oxycontin is expensive. So they shift to heroin due to its relatively low cost and deeper effect. They smoke and inject the tar version and use the liquid version in eyedroppers.

While there is little good statistical data on this switch to heroin beyond arrest records, the young woman estimated that in an average group of Juneau young people 6 out of 10 would have used heroin. Honestly, I am not quite sure what to do with this information.

The parents at the event looked embarrassed. They knew about the problem, but beyond the embarrassment they didn't know what to do either. Traditionally parents blame teachers for not doing something, teachers blame parents for not being better parents, and the police arrest the ones they catch in possession. The U.S. already has one and a half times as many people in prison as China with only 23 percent of the population. Filling our prisons fuller is just not a rational answer.

Many of us who were around during the late '70s and early '80s remember the myth that cocaine wasn't addictive. We saw firsthand through friends and acquaintances the devastation cocaine addiction caused. We know heroin is addictive. Alaska should be considering right now how to fundamentally change this situation. It won't be through blaming our teachers, or parents, or throwing our kids in jail. It will be through a proactive approach that recognizes the tremendous future resource these kids can be to Alaska if they get help now.

So what is the answer? The *ADN* articles last summer pointed out there were precious few slots open in the existing methadone program in Anchorage, the Fairbanks program is full, and there is no program in Juneau. One thing we can obviously do is expand these methadone programs to help those addicted get off heroin. This is one of those things like getting lost in the Alaska wilderness; it doesn't matter what stupid mistake you made to get yourself in the situation, when you're missing, Alaskans come find you. If our kids are addicted to heroin, we need to do what we can to get them clean. It would be a terrible waste of Alaska's future resources if we don't.

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