

## **A Methadone story: It giveth and it taketh away Rineyville woman shares her experience with methadone for pain management**

**By BOB WHITE**

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**RINEYVILLE** – Certain-man made substances can make life livable, but also take it away.

Joyce Cole, a 56-year-old Rineyville woman suffering from acute and chronic pain resulting from degenerative spinal disc disorder, describes methadone as one of those substances.

She credits methadone and the doctor who prescribed it for saving her from life-altering pain, but also blames the synthetic drug for nearly killing her on more than one occasion.

It was 2000 when Cole was first referred to a pain management clinic in Louisville for help with her pain.

She'd gone through multiple back surgeries up to that point, but no surgery had managed to stop her pain.

Her back pain eventually became intolerable, so she welcomed any help the drug offered.

"I was ready to die," Cole said. "That doctor saved my life."

With what Cole describes as the "best intentions," she accepted the doctor's prescription for methadone, a powerful opiate pain medication with properties similar to heroin, Oxycontin and other strong pain medicine.

"It does help," Cole said. "The pain was gone."

With methadone in her bloodstream, Cole regained some normalcy in her life.

And taking only half of the doctor's prescribed dosage, at 20 mg instead of 40 mg twice daily, Cole was pleased, initially, with the benefits methadone offered.

Side effects of the drug, and side effects from pairing methadone with other drugs she was taking for anxiety and insomnia, started to become a problem after a couple years.

Cole said this worried her, since she'd been told she would be on methadone for the rest of her life.

"I'd just pass out," Cole said. "I remember waking up with burns on my arms and wondering, 'How'd that happen?'"

Cole's nodding off grew worse and became more frequent.

"I drove on this stuff without being able to recall where I'd been or how I'd got there," Cole said.

The other drugs were intensifying the effect of methadone.

Pairing benzodiazepines, like Clonazepam, with methadone can stop a person's heart and breathing. The combination proves fatal each year for scores of patients nationwide.

One accidental overdose in Hardin County last year was blamed on the concoction, officials said.

Cole said she's lucky not to have become a statistic, since the drugs had that exact effect on her.

After surgery unrelated to her back problems, Cole was prescribed a morphine pump for pain.

She said the doctors all knew what their peers had prescribed, but she now knows she never should have combined the drugs.

“I only pumped it twice,” Cole said. “But I woke up on a ventilator.”

The mixture of drugs in her body stopped Cole’s respiratory system. She was hospitalized and revived.

She says the experience frightened her into making a big decision, one that also nearly killed her.

“After I woke up, the doctor told me that if I did not stop taking narcotics, I would die,” Cole said. “So I stopped right then, cold turkey.”

Having ingested daily doses of methadone and Clonazepam for nearly five years, Cole’s body did not cope well without the substances.

But with the doctor’s warning in her head, Cole dealt with the chills, nausea, fevers and general sickness withdraw symptoms brought.

“I was having horrible cramps in my stomach and Charlie horse’s in my legs,” Cole said. “I didn’t realize what was happening. I felt like I was dying. No wonder people don’t come off drugs.”

She nearly died.

The dreadful withdrawal symptoms put Cole in the hospital once more.

After a week in the hospital without opiates in her system and under close supervision, Cole was released.

It wasn’t the end of her sickness, however.

“It was two or three more weeks after that before I felt like I was going to survive,” Cole said. “I lost 30 pounds, and I was sick all the time. I remember telling myself ‘I’ll never again take methadone.’”

For Cole, the treatment using methadone was worse than the illness.

While she admits methadone saved her from dreadful pain, Cole said she should have opted to live with the pain, rather than endure the blackouts, two near-death experiences and the agony of withdrawal.

“It’s an awful drug,” Cole said. “At least you know you’re alive with the pain. I lost years of my life because of methadone.”

**E-Town Addictions Solutions: A clinic under fire.** Cole shared her story after reading stories last week about a opiate replacement clinic opening in Elizabethtown.

The clinic, E-Town Addictions Solutions, has taken blow-after-blow from local officials vowing to do anything in their power to keep it from opening.

Like many in the community, Cole said she thinks the clinic is a bad idea for Elizabethtown.

The clinic’s application with Kentucky’s Division of Behavioral Health needs Drug Enforcement Administration approval before it doses patients with methadone, but DEA spokesman Rich Isaacson said it’s basically a done deal, since Donna Hillman, director of the Division of Behavioral Health, has given her approval.

“The main requirement for DEA is that the state approves of a clinic,” Isaacson said. “It’s likely they’ll get it.”

Required for state approval is a long list of signatures of support from health, justice and law enforcement officials from the area the clinic will serve.

Hillman assured The News-Enterprise that E-Town Addictions Solutions has filed the necessary information, despite heads of the local jail, city police, psychiatric and common hospitals and sheriff’s department swearing they will not support it.

Such support is needed prior to state approval of the clinic.

Many people accuse clinic representatives of misrepresenting E-Town Addiction Solutions as a counseling center and one which does not use methadone to treat addicts.

Others claim they were duped into signing documents giving support of their respective agencies to the clinic.

Citing the alleged misrepresentation, the heads of Hardin Memorial Hospital and Lincoln Trail Behavioral Health System, say they've rescinded support previously given to the clinic.

Hillman's agency has not released the documents needed to verify which agencies truly gave the clinic their support.

An open records request filed with Hillman last week received no response at all.

Elizabethtown City Attorney D. Dee Shaw said that was no surprise.

An open records request with the city reveals that Shaw never received the documents requested by The News-Enterprise which she filed with the division in September.

Shaw filed an appeal with the Kentucky Attorney General's Office to force release of those documents.

With such contradictory statements being made about the clinic's support, Shaw said she may go further and challenge the validity of the clinic's application.

Lori Nation, the clinic's medical director, said Thursday that those supporting the clinic are afraid to admit it for fear of harassment.

Methadone clinics often arouse opposition. A second clinic, tied to Nation and E-Town Addiction Solutions is being fought by community leaders and anti-drug coalition groups in Somerset.

Terry Scott, who operates three methadone clinics in eastern Kentucky, promises E-Town Addiction Solutions will be a good neighbor.

In a series of letters, Paintsville city officials claim Scott's clinic there has been a benefit to the community. Those letters were provided to The News-Enterprise by Nation and could not be independently confirmed.

She would not, however, provide copies of letters of support or memorandums of agreement — items now under question.

Scott said the Elizabethtown clinic could open now, and treat patients with Suboxone — a drug less addictive, but also less effective than methadone.

Plans are to open the moment the DEA approval comes through, Scott said.

The civilian patient load will not exceed 120, but Scott will allow any number of soldiers in need of treatment to get help through his clinic, he said. The same goes for pregnant addicts.

Addiction experts say methadone is a must for many pregnant addicts, for the safety of the unborn child. |