

Overprescribed Opiates

THE RISE OF HEROIN ADDICTION
AND THE EFFORT TO END
OVERDOSE DEATHS

BY CORINNE BOYER

In 2014, Crystal Webb left Alabama, landed in Eugene and moved in with a friend to kick her opiate and crystal meth addiction.

Making the decision to get distance from an environment in which she found herself intertwined with drugs and dealers was a significant step if she wanted to get clean. Webb says she locked herself away for a month and slept.

“It was painful, but so was using, so I guess maybe I might have been a little conditioned,” she says. “When using, every come-down was painful, so I knew what to expect, just not how long it would take.”

Webb says she slept on the floor for about six months because she was scared of sleeping in the same bed as the woman who is now her wife, as Webb suffered from night terrors, withdrawal and hypnagogic hallucinations.

After coming to Oregon, Webb started working with Occupy Medical, a free universal health care nonprofit, where she met her wife. As she became more involved in the Eugene community by helping people suffering from addiction, Webb encountered a man passed out under a tree with a needle in his arm. Seeing “something like that, it takes you back, and you relive that misery over and over,” she says. “And that’s where cravings come into play, which I still get.”

But Webb says she’s lucky. She has brain damage from an overdose of methamphetamine and the prescription drug Dilaudid, but her doctor says it’s healing. And as her brain heals, Webb has noticed changes. “Just out of the blue I’ll be so sad; I could cry all day long.”

Webb is only one of millions of opiate addicts across the country and thousands in Lane County. On April 21, Prince was found dead in his home, and when an autopsy was conducted the following day, the 5-foot-3-inch singer weighed 112 pounds, according to the Associated Press. Prince died from an overdose of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid.

In 2014, Lane County saw 156 overdose deaths and had “a fatal overdose rate of 15 per 100,000 residents,” according to NorthPoint Recovery Center.

Prescription opioids are derived from the opium plant. “Some opioids, such as morphine and codeine, occur naturally in opium, a gummy substance collected from the seed pod of the opium poppy,” according to the Center for Addiction and Mental Health. When the chemical structure is altered, it becomes a semisynthetic and forms opioids like oxycodone and hydrocodone. Synthetic opioids like fentanyl are not derived from poppies, but heroin is also synthesized from the poppy plant, according to the National Institutes on Drug Abuse.

As the amount of overdose deaths from prescription and non-prescription opiates has escalated in what has become a silent epidemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oregon Health Authority and local health professionals are changing their prescription practices and ways to treat chronic pain.

In June, the Oregon Health Authority announced it will adopt the CDC’s guidelines for prescribing opiates for chronic pain. The CDC’s newest prescription guidelines for doctors notably change the outdated view that addiction was only possible for “high risk patients” to “opioids pose risk to all patients.”

THE GROWTH OF A SILENT EPIDEMIC

Not only was kicking the habit hard for Webb, but beating addiction comes with a plethora of obstacles. Ten years