

Rising painkiller abuse outpaces available treatment

Forums explore chronic pain and opioid abuse

By **KATHY ANEY**
East Oregonian

Dr. Chuck Hofmann helps people addicted to prescription painkillers find their way back to normal life.

The Baker physician runs a clinic where he treats addicts with a medication called buprenorphine to curb cravings. Hofmann said many of his patients got hooked on prescription painkillers after surgery or injuries.

Hofmann described the recent metamorphosis of one of his patients. The young father was spending every waking hour trying to score drugs — first opioids and then heroin, which is cheaper. He lost a good job. He spent time in jail. After starting a regimen of buprenorphine, under the brand name Suboxone, and undergoing counseling, he has found himself again.

“He’s got his kids back. In three months, he’ll have a full-time job,” Hofmann said. “From a provider’s

standpoint, it’s the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

Hofmann hopes other providers can catch the vision and start offering medically assisted therapies (MAT), too. There simply aren’t enough providers who offer treatment. Many opioid addicts can’t easily access treatment without driving long distances. The few providers who offer treatment in Eastern Oregon are getting outpaced by the epidemic.

The numbers are disheartening. The Oregon Health Authority reports that more Oregonians die from prescription opioids than any other drug, including alcohol, methamphetamines, heroin and cocaine. An average of three Oregonians overdose on prescription painkillers each week. Opioid abuse has tripled since 2000 and someone overdoses in the U.S. about every 20 minutes. Oregon ranks highest in non-medical use of prescription painkillers in the country. In 2014, a quarter of Oregonians received a prescription for an opioid.

All that translates into a huge need for doctors, physician’s assistants and nurse practitioners to join the effort by taking the required training and applying for necessary waivers.

Hofmann urged fellow providers to attend upcoming forums on non-cancer pain management in Hermiston, Pendleton, Ontario or La Grande. The seminars offer free continuing medical education credits, funded by the Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization and a state grant. Forums are scheduled for Jan. 27 in Hermiston at Good Shepherd Hospital, Feb. 24 in Pendleton at St. Anthony Medical Center, April 28 in La Grande at Grande Ronde Hospital and May 12 in Ontario at St. Alphonsus Hospital. All run from 5-9 p.m.

Topics include talking to patients about addiction, the neuroanatomy and neurochemistry of addiction, pain schools, nondrug treatment options and the role of buprenorphine in treatment.

Other free forums, open to the public, will explore acute versus chronic pain, non-drug options

for chronic pain and the role of psychosocial support in chronic pain management. These forums are Jan. 26 in Hermiston, Feb. 23 in Pendleton, April 27 in La Grande and May 11 in Ontario at the same locations. All run 6:30-9:30 p.m.

Register online at www.eocco.com or call Briona at 503-952-5010 or email her at briona.campbell@modahealth.com.

Hofmann said that attitudes about pain are changing.

“Fifteen or 20 years ago, they told us we had to start taking care of chronic non-cancer pain,” he said. “Now, we know that these drugs aren’t so good over the long-term.”

With increased prescribing, deaths from unintentional opioid overdoses increased dramatically.

Hofmann explained that with long-term use, patients develop a heightened sensitivity to pain called hyperalgesia. Even if an injury has healed, the brain still senses pain. The hypersensitivity coupled with withdrawal symptoms makes it difficult to stop taking the pills.

“They’re damned if they do and damned if they don’t,” Hofmann

said. “They hate having to take the pills, but if they don’t take the pills, they’re even worse off. That’s where buprenorphine comes in as the solution to help taper them off and control their cravings and maybe control the pain a little bit until they get straightened out.”

The therapy isn’t without critics who question the wisdom of replacing one drug with another.

“That’s a legitimate criticism, because in short, yeah we are,” Hofmann said. “But at the same time, we’re replacing an illegal drug with a legal drug, a drug that’s hard to abuse and a drug that lets them feel healthy and normal and allows them to get back in the workforce and take care of their children. Even if I can never get a patient off the Suboxone, I’m okay with that.”

Recently, Oregon changed its policy for prescribing opioids for patients insured under the Oregon Health Plan. Opioids are now limited to 90 days following acute injury, surgery or severe flare-up of chronic pain, but more non-drug services such as physical therapy and acupuncture are covered.

Cousins introduced as Happy Canyon Court

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

It’s a family affair for the 2017 Happy Canyon Court.

Cousins and Happy Canyon princesses Gabriella Lewis and Virginia Conner were formally introduced at the Pendleton Convention Center Saturday morning.

Amidst the seemingly endless stream of gifts and photo requests from family, friends and well-wishers, Lewis and Conner explained how their families were uniquely intertwined with the Round-Up and Happy Canyon.

Conner, 19, is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation whose family has participated in the Happy Canyon Night Show for four generations.

Conner herself has participated in the show, having played roles as the bride and a member of the riding party as well as doing work behind the scenes.

Additionally, several of her family members have served as Happy Canyon princesses in the past.

“I have big moccasins to fill,” she said.

Gabriella Lewis, 18, is a member of the Nez Perce, although she also has Umatilla and Cayuse ancestry.

Like Conner, Lewis’ family has deep roots in Happy Canyon in addition to being original Round-Up campers in the Indian Village.

Bobbie Conner, the director of the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute and the princesses’ aunt, said Virginia and Lewis’ familial bond goes back seven



Happy Canyon princesses Gabriella Lewis, left, and Virginia Conner greet attendees at a Happy Canyon event at the Pendleton Convention Center Saturday.

Photo by Antonio Sierra

generations, both being descendants of Chief Joseph.

With Conner living in Pendleton and Lewis in Spokane, the pair said they’re using the opportunity to get to know each other better.

They’ll certainly spend a lot of time together while they travel to rodeos and events across the northwest representing Happy Canyon.

All of these commitments come on top of their personal lives.

Conner is currently working at Dave’s Chevron and the Pendleton Coffee Bean & Bistro and expects to enroll at Blue

Mountain Community College before transferring to a four-year school to study business management.

Lewis is enrolled at Walla Walla Community College with the expectation of transferring to Boise State University, where she wants to major in graphic design.

Although the job of Happy Canyon princess requires a lot of time and effort, Happy Canyon president Corey Neistadt gave them a frank, if tongue-in-cheek, advice.

“Remember this is fun, damn it,” he said.

PENDLETON

School district polls public on snow days decision

East Oregonian

With Pendleton public schools forced to cancel seven school days because of snow and other inclement weather, the school district is surveying the public about how they should make up for lost time.

“Before you begin this survey, I would remind you that there are no simple solutions. We have a responsibility to meet minimal hours of instruction for our children as well a duty to offer every student the entire course curriculum,” superintendent Andy Kovach wrote in a post introducing the survey, which is on the district’s website. “To do this we need to find additional instructional time between now and the end of the current end of school (June 8th) or add additional

days to the year ... or both.”

The survey presents users with several options to rank in order of desirability.

- Do nothing and apply for a waiver from the department of education for being out of compliance.

- Add five days to the end of the school year for grades K-11 and add three additional days for seniors with the current school year.

- Add 15 minutes to the end of each day from Jan. 30 to the end of the school year, increasing the work day for all employees by 15 minutes per day. The teacher work day is extended to eight hours. Would require union agreement.

- Extend Mondays for students to go from 8:45 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday morning teacher meeting/training time is reduced by 15 minutes.

Would require union agreement.

- Do away with late start Mondays. Starting Jan. 30, Mondays would be like any other day of the week 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. No teacher meeting/training time. Would require union agreement

- Add three to five days during spring break as student instructional days. Additional required days would be added to the end of the school year.

The survey also provides space to write in a solution. It closes on Wednesday.

Kovach wrote that his recommendation to the Pendleton School Board was to extend the school year by

five days for grades K-11 and three days for seniors.

At a meeting Thursday in Salem, the Oregon State Board of Education will consider making temporary allowances for districts that have been hit with a plethora of snow days.

Regardless of the decision, Kovach wrote, the district is committed to retaining June 8 as the seniors’ graduation date, even if it means students finish their academics in the days leading up to the ceremony or later.

Kovach warned that the district isn’t out of the woods and could see more snow days before the winter ends.

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Commissioners say EOTEC roads need state funding

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
East Oregonian

\$1.1 million, and there is no local funding available.

Umatilla County Board of Commissioners decided Monday to seek state funding for more than \$1 million to improve roads to the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center.

Larry Givens, chairman of the board, said he and fellow commissioners Bill Elfering and George Murdock all voted for the action, which aims to improve more than 2.1 miles on East Airport and South Ott roads, the route to access to the site in Hermiston.

East Airport has 4,752 feet paved to a width of approximately 22 feet, according to the county, but the road needs to be paved to 24 feet wide with two feet of shoulder on either side for access to the center, along with clearing vegetation to a width of 30 feet. The county estimated the cost for the improvements at \$380,000.

Paving about 2,900 feet of Ott Road to the north of East Airport Road would cost about \$324,00, and paving 3,500 feet of Ott Road to the south would run to about \$393,000. Those stretches are gravel roads.

The total cost for the improvements is just shy of

local funding available.

Givens said the county board passed the order so local state lawmakers could advocate for the funds if the Legislature, which convenes in February, considers transportation bills. How likely any request is to receive funding depends on how the Legislature deals with the state’s \$1.7 billion budget gap between resources and providing services.

The county board also voted for an order granting up to \$250,000 of property tax relief for the surviving spouses of fire service personnel, police officers and reserve officers who died in the line of duty. And the board voted to oppose Oregon Gov. Kate Brown’s proposal to cut \$10 million in funding to veterans services in the upcoming two-year state budget.

Givens also said the board took care of some housekeeping, with appointments to the budget and other committees, and approved an update to the joint management agreement between the county and the cities of Umatilla and Hermiston to allow Umatilla to oversee land use within the urban growth boundary.

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