

Kicking the addiction

Congress working on a dozen bills to counter opioid dependence

By Kathy Aney
East Oregonian

Rep. Greg Walden asked for advice recently on a subject that is grabbing plenty of headlines these days — abuse of prescription painkillers.

Walden met May 3 with health care providers, pharmacists, hospital administrators, law enforcement and others at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston for an opioid roundtable. He was scheduled to have similar conversations in Bend and Medford and is working with his congressional colleagues through 12 proposed bills to tackle the opioid addiction epidemic.

“I don’t think the general public knows how bad this is,” he said. “I think my colleagues didn’t know until we started to get into it.”

Dwight Holton provided some stats. Holton is CEO of a non-profit called Lines for Life which works to prevent suicide and drug addiction. He said the toll of opioid abuse is horrendous.

“About 15,000 people die from prescription opioid overdoses every year in America,” he said. “Basically, it’s a jetliner of people every week.”

The culprits are painkillers such as Hydrocodone and Oxycodone. Opioids work by changing the way people perceive pain. Once lauded as a less-addictive alternative to morphine, synthetic opioids are now getting a hard look. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that the country is in the midst of an opioid overdose epidemic with more than 200,000 overdoses a year. An estimated 2.1 million people abuse opioids, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported a drop in life expectancy for white women — one possible reason is the abuse of prescription painkillers.

The group assembled in Good



E.J. Harris/East Oregonian

Congressman Greg Walden listens as Dwight Holton, CEO of Line for Life, explains some of the issues with pain killer addiction in the state during a roundtable discussion with health care providers, pharmacists, hospital administrators and law enforcement May 3 at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.



E.J. Harris/East Oregonian

CTUIR Housing Director Marcus Luke talks about drug usage on the Umatilla Indian Reservation with Congressman Greg Walden on Tuesday in Hermiston.

Shepherd’s board room gave Walden an unfiltered look at the struggle to subdue the opioid beast.

La Grande psychiatrist Joel Rice said he helps opioid addicts to break away by prescribing buprenorphine (sold as Suboxone).

Critics say using Suboxone, which is also addictive, is simply exchanging one drug for another. But Rice considers the drug a critical tool to help people break free from painkillers.

“It’s easier to get off of,” he said. “You feel normal on it. You

can rebuild your life so you have something to live for.”

Rice said he isn’t able to accommodate every patient who needs medication-assisted treatment — prescribers are limited to 30 patients initially and a maximum of 100 after a year. Holton is one of only six Suboxone prescribers east of The Dalles, Holton said.

Pending legislation would lift the cap after a year for substance abuse specialists. With this in the works, Rice is considering starting a new clinic in Pendleton in order to fill a gap in Umatilla County.

Rice said he sees patients from every walk of life, from millionaires to people who are homeless.

Michelle Frizzell, a therapist who works with Rice, also sat at the table. Frizzell knows the struggles their patients face because she went through them herself. She broke her foot and was

See *ADDICTION*, Page C7