

TROUBLE

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tional state. A few years ago, hospital staff recognized the need for a place to care for those who came to the Emergency Room in a state of mental crisis, and the room finds use with "reasonable frequency," according to Dr. Paul Kranitz, director of the emergency department here and a key component of a coordinated effort toward greater mental health in Cottage Grove.

It's an effort that takes the work of many to deal with issues that vary with each individual, and the safe room often brings the agencies that typically respond to mental health crises in the community — the emergency department, emergency responders, counselors with South Lane Mental Health and the officers of the Cottage Grove Police Department — into physical proximity to each other.

Mental health issues can be as varied as the population they affect, and treatment of those issues can also vary widely. As such, not all of the patients who find themselves in the hospital's safe room are aware of the situation that has brought them there, but Kranitz said many do in fact recognize their illness. The ER sees between zero and a half-dozen such cases each week, he said.

"We see patients in crisis, and a lot of them recognize that they're not well," he said. "People often walk themselves in, and they're often accompanied by members of their family."

At the hospital, the problems a patient is having manifest themselves in many ways.

"Patients can be thinking about hurting themselves or others," Kranitz said. "They can be hearing voices, can be sad or anxious. There are myriad presentations, and they're unique to each patient. But most want to be taken care of, to have their mental health improved, and they're often very appreciative when that happens."

Here in the Emergency Room, Kranitz and staff are trained to deal with crises involving the

human body, and mental health issues are approached from the same angle.

"We're talking about an organ of the human body, the brain," he said. "It's no different than a patient who has had a heart attack that you would put on a heart monitor."

With most external stimuli and dangerous instruments removed, the safe room fosters safer conditions for the patient, Kranitz said, but also for the staff members that care for him or her. Treatments administered in the ER can range from simple conversations to medications to counseling; some patients will be admitted to the hospital, and some will require a longer period of treatment in a facility to return to more normal function.

Sometimes, events leading up to such an Emergency Room visit have brought an individual into contact with local law enforcement, though Kranitz said it certainly doesn't happen in the majority of cases. Still, Commander Scott Shepherd said that the Cottage Grove Police Department has witnessed more mental health crises recently, and the log of activities for the Cottage Grove Police Department typically includes several responses to mental health issues each week.

"We've seen more people in crisis in the last six months or so," Shepherd said. "Whether it's because of illness or lack of treatment or choices an individual will make to self-medicate, we're called to respond to behavior that draws attention — disorderly conduct, property crimes, crimes against people. It just seems more prevalent recently."

Shepherd said the Police Department is set up to hold people accountable for crimes they may have committed, but in situations involving mental health crises, police frequently depend on staff at the Emergency Room and counselors at South Lane Mental Health — the local nonprofit dedicated to helping residents of South Lane County understand their mental and emotional issues and take steps

toward improving their condition — to consider the next steps.

"If their actions are disorderly or they become fixated on something or someone, their behavior can often be considered criminal," Shepherd said. "Part of our responsibility is to try and make sure if someone in crisis needs evaluation and try to make it happen. We can hold people accountable to a certain degree, but we also depend on South Lane Mental Health and the ER for medical interventions."

Many treatments for mental health crises in Cottage Grove involve coordination between staff at the ER and counselors at South Lane Mental Health, which treats about 1500 people per year through counseling, prescribing medications and other interventions, according

"The philosophy has changed to one of helping folks do their best in their own communities. Twenty years ago, the state spent 80 percent of its mental health budget on the 2000 or so patients in the state hospital, but people started to realize that wasn't the way to go. Approaching it as a community health issue is more dignified."

— South Lane Mental Health Executive Director Tom Wheeler

to Director of Services Valeria Mainwald.

Still, dealing with patients in crisis is not the most common form of help SLMH offers its patients, most of whom, according to Mainwald, simply require a little help to go about their daily lives.

"It's community-based, old-school social work," she said, "anything from helping with housing to trips to the doctor's office to the Oregon Health Plan — often, it's routine, day-to-day things that people with severe mental or emotional problems have a hard time pulling off."

In addition to counseling from 33 therapists on its staff, South Lane Mental Health visits several patients in their homes twice a day, every day, Mainwald said, and the agency has intensive programs for about 25 high-risk youth in the community. It also operates housing for about 20 people.

The approach is markedly different from attitudes about mental health that have held sway in the past, according to Mainwald and SLMH Executive Director Tom Wheeler.

"The philosophy has changed to one of helping folks do their best in their own communities," Wheeler said. "Twenty years ago, the state spent 80 percent of its mental health budget on the 2000 or so patients in the state hospital, but people started to realize that wasn't the way to

housing, and the population is growing. There's a new facility being built in Junction City, but the state is closing as many beds in Salem as they're opening there. Even if a patient is suicidal, we might spend hours looking for a place for them."

In addition, the basic tenets of a free society make seeking out treatment for mental health issues a voluntary act.

"Unless a person is immediately dangerous, they can refuse treatment," Mainwald said. "That's where the connection between us and the other agencies really helps people reengage and helps us all share our concerns."

"The trouble is often that certain people have issues, and they seek treatment," CGPD's Shepherd said. "They are treated, then they feel like they're fine and stop treatment, and the behaviors come back."

Increased demand for medical services brought on by the Affordable Care Act has also greatly increased activity in Cottage Grove's Emergency Room and demand for services at South Lane Mental Health, and treatment isn't always sought (and isn't available in Cottage Grove) for the substance abuse issues believed to accompany about half the mental health crises locally.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle to treating mental health issues is an unseen one.

"There's a stigma to seeking treatment for mental health issues, but it's totally fabricated," Kranitz said. "We're talking about treating a disease or diseases, and there's no shame in that."

"Most people don't want to seek out treatment," Mainwald said. "There's a stigma involved, it's hard work and there's a cost involved. Life is more stressful these days, and we're more visible to each other in a small town."

Still, help is available in Cottage Grove for those who seek it.

"We can't reel them in, but when they're ready, we're here," Wheeler said.

February is National CHILDREN'S DENTAL HEALTH MONTH

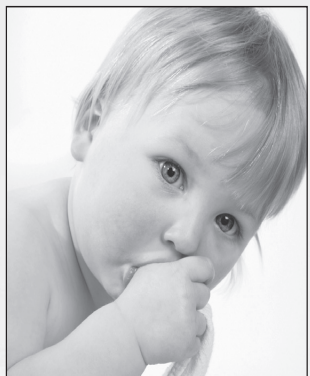
A CHILD'S SMILE IS ONE OF LIFE'S GREATEST BLESSINGS

Three common childhood dental health concerns

When your baby's first teeth come in, everyone rejoices; it's a sign that all is progressing as it should. But as your child ages, various dental concerns can come along as well. Some issues are genetic and will require orthodontic work a bit later on, but there are others you can prepare for right now.

1. BABY BOTTLE TOOTH DECAY

Prevent early childhood caries, or cavities, by nursing or putting only mother's milk and formula in your baby's bottles. Don't let your baby fall asleep with the nipple in the mouth; gently wipe your infant's teeth with a sterile gauze pad before sleep time.



2. THUMB SUCKING

Thumb sucking is generally accepted to be a harmless habit in young children; sucking is a natural reflex in babies, and for toddlers it is

an effective self-soothing strategy. However, the American Dental Association says that thumb sucking after the age of four can affect the alignment of your child's teeth and jaw. Talk to your pediatrician for advice about thumb sucking.

3. ACCIDENTAL TRAUMA TO THE TEETH

A blow to the mouth, cheek, or jaw may cause damage to teeth above or below the gum line. Take your child to the dentist's or to the hospital emergency room if a tooth is cracked or knocked out or if an object gets caught in the mouth or between the teeth. In the case of a knocked-out tooth, try to recover it and bring it to the dentist or hospital. Keep the tooth moist, ideally in the child's mouth; if your child is old enough to not swallow it, place it between the teeth and gums or in the gap from where it fell out. You can also place the tooth in a cup of milk.

Douglas G. Maddess, DMD
Brightening Lives One Smile at a Time

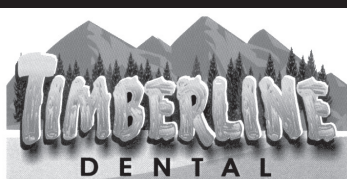


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