

EPIDEMIC COMMUNITY COMMENT: Mike Goldsby, August 10, 2017

What do you think when you hear the word epidemic? Small pox? Typhoid Fever? The movie Outbreak? Epidemic means affecting a disproportionately large number of individuals within a community at the same time. It also means something that is excessively prevalent and possibly contagious.

We do not think much about epidemics that do not affect us, especially epidemics that we think we are immune to or are not contagious. Americans paid very little attention to Ebola, as long as it was spreading "over there." People began to freak out when it looked like it had landed on our shores.

Public Health officials are using the word epidemic to describe overdose deaths from opiates and opioids. And they say this epidemic is not only on our shores, it is in our backyards.

Opiates are pain killers, found in poppy plants, and turned into opium, morphine and heroin. The ancients knew the dual nature of this drug, both a wonderful healing medicine but also potentially a deadly poison; A medicine with the power to ease suffering and the potential to cause suffering as well.

The term opioids means drugs that are synthetic versions of opiates; Hydrocodone, more commonly known as Vicodin®, oxycodone, commonly known as OxyContin®, Fentanyl and many, many others.

Many people use these medicines with no negative effects. But other people suffer and even die from these same drugs.

Trump formed a presidential Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis. Chaired by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, the commission has urged Trump to "declare a national emergency under the Public Health Service Act." The Commission report stated, "With approximately 142 Americans dying every day, America is enduring a death toll equal to September 11th every three weeks."

The report goes on to state “We want to awaken every American to this simple fact: if this scourge has not found you or your family yet, without bold action by everyone, it soon will.”

First off, the term “Combating Drug Addiction” sounds to me a little too much like The War on Drugs. The War on Drugs has really been a War on drug users. I can’t think of any epidemic that has been cured by a War. We can’t get out of this epidemic by building more prisons or more walls.

Second, we need to act locally and not wait for a Federal solution. If you are worried about someone, try to talk with them. Every local treatment program has experience dealing with this epidemic and they can provide information and referrals. The Open Door clinics have effective medical treatments, with medications like Suboxone® . The local Twelve Step Community of Narcotics Anonymous is also a very powerful resource.

An epidemic calls to us to use every tool at our disposal and that includes harm reduction. Syringe exchange and overdose prevention with drugs like Naloxone are also important resources.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment