

Adams short on treatment options for drug addictions

BY VANESSA PELLECHIO Times Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, September 29, 2016 12:06 am

Alyssa Smith of Bendersville drove more than an hour to Lebanon County every single morning to get her daily dose of methadone.

The 2006 Gettysburg High School graduate began taking the prescription drug last October to help her overcome the severe side effects of heroin withdrawal.

From constant cravings and chills to sleep deprivation and depression, Smith's withdrawal not only affected her physically, but also emotionally.

After Smith's twin sister Brooke Fiorentino died of a heroin overdose Feb. 24, 2015, she knew it was time to find a new way to treat her addiction.

"I wanted to try not using medication, but I knew I needed to from the grief of losing my sister," Smith said. She's stayed clean for 10 months.

"It helped me get my life back," Smith said. "It let me have a job."

Just like Smith, many others suffering from heroin or opioid addictions struggle to find the resources they need in Adams County.

"The issue is when they want the help they experience a wait in care," said Dr. Chris Echterling, medical director for vulnerable populations at WellSpan Health. "By the time the position opens up, they've lost the commitment to recovery."

There is almost always a waiting list to get methadone, Echterling said, which is why Smith could not get her medication transferred to a closer location.

Echterling said methadone is part of "medical-assisted therapy" for addictions, but is not suitable for every patient.

"Some are saying that's how we should be going," Echterling said. "While you are still on opioid pain medication, you are not replacing one addiction for another."

Adams County has no licensed methadone clinics, but TrueNorth Wellness Services, located in Gettysburg and Hanover, recently began offering another treatment narcotic, Suboxone.

Due to the rapid spread of heroin use, TrueNorth Wellness Services started the Suboxone treatment program in August. It includes "regular medication evaluation and active counseling," said George Brown, chief operations officer for TrueNorth.

"Heroin use has escalated across the country," Brown said. "Gettysburg is no exception. There has been a significant increase of need for this type of program in the Gettysburg area."

Potential patients must undergo an evaluation by Dr. Eugene Huang, the program's physician, a drug and alcohol assessment, in addition to a physical, according to Brown.

Echterling has been working to educate healthcare providers across WellSpan about the chemical side of heroin and opioid addictions.

He said there is plenty of finger-pointing in the medical world at doctors for causing the opioid dependency.

"The world 'blame' implies intent to get us in a situation," Echterling said. "'Contribute' is the word I use. I think a lot of people contributed to the problem."

Doctors were trained to treat chronic pain rather than looking at a body's functions.

What medical professionals thought they knew about addiction in the past was not entirely accurate, Echterling admitted, saying doctors were trained to treat chronic pain instead of scrutinizing how the body functions.

"People had the idea it was a moral choice," Echterling said. "But it's really very physically-based. It should be treated like diabetes."

Echterling said it's up to medical staff to have respectful, rather than accusatory, conversations with patients, referring to addiction treatment just like heart treatment.

"I've seen in my clinical practice a lot dealing with addiction," Echterling said. "It's a big problem. It's not bigger than we are. We can help people recover their lives."

Smith decided to wean off methadone before moving to South Korea earlier this month with her husband Brad, who is in the U.S. military.

Smith's mother, Lynne Bishop, said she's become an advocate for methadone and Suboxone treatment because it was the first time she saw her daughter mentally heal.

"I have a good reason I'm coming off it," Smith said. "I didn't want to get pregnant and have a baby on methadone. The baby could become addicted to it."

Treatment centers

24-hour medical assistance:

White Deer Run Regional Support Center

(Substance Abuse Phone hotline) 1-866-769-6822

TrueNorth Mobile Crisis Unit

717-637-7633 or 866-325-0339

WellSpan York Hospital Crisis Unit

717-851-5320 or 800-673-2496

Local hospitals

Gettysburg Hospital

717-334-2121

Hanover Hospital

717-637-3711 or 800-673-2426

Non-emergency substance abuse treatment

PA Counseling (Gettysburg) 717-337-0026

TrueNorth Wellness Services (Gettysburg) 717-334-9111

TrueNorth Wellness Services (Hanover) 717-632-4900

Cornerstone Counseling (Hanover) 717-632-6555