

# Guest column: Opiate problem is growing in Ashland County

By DENNIS DYER Published: June 19, 2015 4:00AM

There was an Ashland County heroin summit last November. The summit was conducted to inform Ashland County residents about the serious opiate problem in our county. We also wanted to get input from those attending.

A significant number of those attending the summit recommended community education as part of what should be done to deal with this problem. In collaboration with the Mental Health and Recovery Board, Ashland County Council on Alcoholism & Drug Abuse will do a public education effort to inform the public about this growing problem.

There will be more articles, billboards, newspaper ads, radio public service announcements and other efforts to inform the public.

ACCADA is the outpatient treatment and prevention provider for Ashland County. It is a contract agency of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County. ACCADA also is a partner agency of the United Way.

One way to demonstrate how the problem of opiate (opioids) addiction has grown is to examine the number of new ACCADA intakes annually. In 1997, we admitted no individuals with an opiate diagnosis. By 2005, we had admitted 21. In 2010, there were 50 admitted. In 2014, there were 83 people admitted for an opiate diagnosis.

This does not count those who carried over from prior years and still were receiving services.

ACCADA opioid admissions were: 1997 -- 0; 2000 -- 1; 2002 -- 3; 2005 -- 21; 2008 -- 36; 2010 -- 50; 2011 -- 92; 2012 -- 73; 2013 -- 74; and 2014 -- 83. (See the graphic with this column).

And remember, these are just the new admissions for treatment. Of course, some do seek treatment more than once. We would have to assume that there are a good number in the community who have not yet sought treatment services. Many seek treatment voluntarily while others are court ordered.

At one point, it was determined that 55 percent of ACCADA outpatient treatment resources were focused on those individuals with opiate drug abuse disorders. A recent analysis showed that 59 percent of those using opiates were heroin addicted.

For the heroin summit, our county prosecutor reviewed the cases in which he filed felony charges and 45 percent were related to opiate addiction. Opiates include both opiate-based painkillers and heroin.

Ashland County probation estimates that about one-third of those on active probation are opiate-related cases. It also was noted that there is a high rate of probation violations among this group.

Municipal Court Judge John Good recently stated, "I've heard the heroin problem in Ashland County referred to as an epidemic, it's more like a tidal wave."

He also has noted that the number of heroin-related cases has increased dramatically in the last three years.

Sheriff E. Wayne Risner indicated that he has seen a countywide increase in burglaries and theft related to opiate addiction. Many times family are victims. This also contributes to jail crowding and a steady number of inmates experiencing opiate withdrawal at Ashland County Jail.

There has been a steep increase in the prescribing of opiate-based painkillers in the last 20 years. According to the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the distribution of opiate-based painkillers increased six-fold from 1997 to 2007. That is a 500 percent increase.

This amounts to 45.6 doses on a per-capita basis in 2014. In 2014, that amounted to 45.6 pills for every man, woman and child in Ashland County. This puts a very large amount of medication into the community. The average number of doses per patient was 131.

It is estimated that 80 percent of the opiate-based medication misused comes from someone with a legal prescription but diverted to someone else. Many who are prescribed medication do not use all of the medication and it may end up being sold, given away or stolen from a medicine cabinet.

According to the Ashland County coroner's office, there were six drug overdose deaths (unintended or undetermined) in 2014, and five of the six involved opioids (heroin or painkillers). Unintentional drug overdoses have become the leading cause of injury death in Ohio.

Unintentional drug overdoses caused 2,110 deaths of Ohio residents in 2013. According to a 2015 news release from the Ohio Department of Health, there were about 196 more deaths in 2013 as compared to 2012. It also stated that heroin-related deaths increased in 2013, significantly surpassing prescription opiates among unintentional overdose deaths.

Cassandra Holtzmann, director of Job and Family Services in the county, has advised that nearly all the local Children Services cases involve alcohol/drug abuse issues as either a factor or the root cause of the child abuse and neglect cases. Children Services is doing a review to determine how many are opiate related.

The information in this article clearly indicates that this problem has grown dramatically but it does not describe in human terms the pain and suffering of those who become addicted. The distress and heartache felt by family members also is extreme. There also are serious impacts on the whole community.

Another article will explore the human tragedy of the opiate epidemic with individuals sharing some of their stories.

Dennis Dyer is the director of Ashland County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. He can be reached at 419-289-7675.