

THE RECORDER

GREENFIELD, MASS. ESTABLISHED 1792. - N.E. NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR 2012.

Taking prescription drugs out of equation

What's happening this weekend

Would you keep an unlocked gun in your home? Of course not, that's too dangerous. There is too much potential for that gun to get into small or curious hands, resulting in a catastrophic accident. By the same token, you should not keep prescription medications in an unlocked medicine cabinet. They are a loaded gun.

The analogy may sound dramatic, even alarmist. Here's why it's not: An estimated 70 percent of people 12 and older who abuse prescription drugs get them from family and friends, while one in seven teens say they abused prescription drugs to get high over the past year (60 percent did so before age 15). A few other loud and clear warning bells: Prescription drugs are the number one choice among 12- and 13-year-olds and two out of five teens believe that prescription drugs are safer than illegal drugs. Meanwhile, four out of five people who use heroin have a history of prescription drug misuse, which is why today's heroin epidemic is so closely linked to the abuse of prescription drugs — and why it we must consider this context when tackling our opioid crisis — and I do mean “our crisis.” This is a health menace that impacts all sectors of our communities.

By now, the state's well-documented opioid epidemic is being viewed as the public health calamity it is. According to the state Department of Public Health, overdose deaths increased by 57 percent between 2012 and 2014 in this state. As a result, across the state (and even the nation) public officials and devastated family members are hard at work creating policies and implementing practices designed to raise awareness, change habits and save lives.

Today, more than 200 health professionals including nurses, doctors, pharmacists, dentists and other providers will gather at the Log Cabin in Easthampton for the Safe Prescribing and Opioid Abuse Conference sponsored by this office. After every seat had been filled, we had people phoning our office pleading to get in. This urgency is because professionals are hungry for guidance about how to respond to this crisis. They will learn about best (changing) practices when it comes to pain management, why accountability for pharmacists is so important and why we must erase the stigma of addiction so people can get the help they need. As a society, we must face this crisis clear-eyed and defiant because opioids are a formidable foe.

As with all threats to the public health, this one must be approached on multiple fronts. It is not a problem we can leave to health professionals to solve alone. Ordinary people can help in a big way by locking up the medicine that is needed — and equally important, getting rid of medicine that is no longer needed. What isn't there won't tempt. And medicines should not be flushed down the toilet. For environmental reasons, they must be disposed of properly. In cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Administration, my office and many law enforcement agencies in our region are collaborating for the fifth time to sponsor the drug collection day in eight Hampshire County towns and five more in Franklin County. Community members are encouraged to empty their medicine cabinets and closets of prescription and nonprescription medications and get rid of them Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in Amherst, Belchertown, Easthampton, Hadley, Northampton, Southampton, Ware and Williamsburg, Ashfield, Bernardston, Deerfield, Greenfield and Montague. In addition, 17 area communities have permanent drop boxes for medication at their police stations. To date, the permanent drop boxes and collection day events have safely disposed of 23,000 pounds of drugs. But there is an endless supply. For a listing of specific locations where you can drop off unwanted drugs Saturday, visit our website at NorthwesternDA.org.

Saturday will also offer an opportunity to witness the human toll the crisis has taken. A grass-roots effort among Hampshire County residents has led to the “We Walk for Recovery” at 4:30 p.m. in Grenville Park in Ware. Donations raised at the event will go toward purchase of Narcan. Ware may not be in The Recorder's readership area, but make no mistake, this epidemic knows nothing about geographical boundaries.

There are many other initiatives in the works, spearheaded by Hampshire HOPE and the Opioid Task Force of Franklin County and the North Quabbin Region: efforts to increase treatment options for people struggling with substance use disorders, better tracking of data, which is crucial to our understanding of the scope of the problem, work to improve prescription drug monitoring capabilities, and educating people about the signs of addiction. For more information, visit the websites for these busy task forces, where you can also find information about how to get more involved and where to get help.

David Sullivan is the district attorney for Hampshire and Franklin counties and the town of Athol.