



Deadly resurgence

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By Donna Fielder / Staff Writer

Heroin: That was the drug of the old days when junkies nodded on street corners, and it killed entertainers like Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin and John Belushi.

Heroin: That's the drug of today, when prescription medication abusers buy it as a cheaper alternative for the same euphoria they get from Oxycontin, Vicodin and Dilaudid.

It's the drug of choice for half the abusers in Denton and the North Texas area.

It's the drug that has killed eight people in the county so far this year.

It has overcome cocaine and edged out methamphetamine locally as the drug most used recreationally.

But few people outside of law enforcement know this, and many of those who do — mainly the parents of addicts, whom they are desperately trying to keep alive — are in denial.

“Three years ago, meth was the No. 1 drug of choice,” said Denton County Narcotics Sgt. Jeff Davis.

“Now, heroin is at least 50 percent of the cases in this area. ‘Cheese’ is heroin cut with a sleep aid.

They're just prettying up a dirty word. It makes a tan powder that people snort. It gets them started. It's not sticking a needle in your arm at first. But later, they need more and more to get the effect, and the needle is the only way to go.”

Heroin addiction can begin with a sports or work injury. Doctors typically prescribe an opiate such as hydrocodone for pain. Take a little more than prescribed, and suddenly, it's not about the absence of pain, it's about the incredible feeling of pleasure. That euphoria is highly addictive. Some people don't want to give it up when the doctor no longer provides the prescription.

The pills are available on the street, but they are expensive. Heroin is an opiate, and it's cheaper.

“And there is always a drug dealer open 24-7 who will take a laptop computer in payment,” Davis said.

An addicted person may introduce it to a friend and another friend, and soon, there are parties. Most people who sell heroin are addicted to it themselves and use the money to supply their own habits, he said.

Drug counselor Scott Wisenbaker said the first time seldom is the last time for a heroin user. After that, it's a downward spiral without expert help, he said.

“The thing they think the first time they use heroin is, ‘Oh, if I don't die, I'm so going to do this again.’ But it never feels quite that good again,” he said. “They call it ‘chasing the dragon.’ They're trying to feel like the first time they did it, so they use more and more.”

Fifty percent to 60 percent of the people who come to his program, Solutions of North Texas, are heroin users, he said.

The body quickly builds a tolerance to heroin, leading to a need for larger doses. But one day, the dose could be a little purer or cut with something that acts with it in a bad way, or the user drinks alcohol along with the fix, resulting in an overdose.

One of Wisenbaker's clients overdosed 13 times but finally was able to get clean and sober, he said. Now she is studying for a nursing degree while holding down two part-time jobs.

Some are not so lucky. Some do not survive the first overdose. Some die despite the help they are offered.

“When somebody makes them come here and they tell us, ‘I don’t really want to be here,’ it’s a heartbreaker,” he said. “We know we’ll probably get that phone call.”

According to the National Institute for Drug Abuse, heroin is an opiate derived from morphine that is extracted from the Asian poppy plant. It can be injected, snorted or smoked.

All three methods lead to addiction.

Heroin enters the brain through the bloodstream and is converted to morphine, which binds to opiate receptors, according to the NIDA. The receptors are associated with relieving pain and also with reward — the euphoria that abusers are after. But the receptors also are located in the brain stem, in places that control breathing and blood pressure. Heroin overdoses frequently involve a suppression of respiration.

Denton Fire Department Battalion Chief Brad Lahart said paramedics have seen more overdoses this year.

“We lump them all together in our statistics,” he said. “Overdoses are up 9 percent this year from last year. We average 14 a month, including user accidents and suicide attempts and grandma taking her meds twice. All we know is that the amount of Norcan we use has gone up this year.”

Norcan is a drug that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opiate overdose if given soon enough.

“They are in respiratory depression, unconscious and barely breathing,” Lahart said. “We start an IV and give it, but they still need to go to the hospital because the effects of the opiate outlast the effects of the Norcan.”

People who survive an opiate overdose usually do so because they are not alone when they start having trouble breathing. Friends or relatives call 911. They want help for the person who is not breathing, but they are hesitant to reveal what they know about the cause for fear of being in trouble with the police.

“We need information fast about what they took, but usually, we don’t get much,” Lahart said. “Generally, no one knows nothing.”

So far in 2011, two people have died of heroin overdoses in Denton and heroin deaths have occurred one each in Justin, Little Elm, Aubrey, The Colony, Lewisville and Flower Mound.

When such a death occurs, a medical examiner investigator responds to gather information for the medical examiner to use in an autopsy. Troy Taylor, chief death investigator for Denton County, said that often heroin is combined with another drug or cut with something that reacts badly with it. That complicates the investigation, but it also makes heroin that much more deadly.

“Obviously, heroin alone is bad enough,” he said. “But so many drugs are combined with it now, and the effect is that it suppresses the respiratory system.”

Death investigators know that a heroin overdose victim’s mouth turns bluish and that seeing fluids coming from a victim’s mouth and nose are signs of a drug overdose. Sometimes, the victim aspirates the fluids and drowns on the contents of his stomach, he said.

“Sometimes, they literally still have the needle in their arms when we see them,” Taylor said. “Either the heroin is too pure or it’s cut with something really bad. We can tell when a bad batch comes into the metroplex because deaths go up.”

Drug dealers use basically anything they have at hand to dilute or “step on” the heroin they sell, said Denton police Narcotics Sgt. Brad Curtis.

Narcotics officers rarely find a lot of heroin when they arrest dealers. It’s not that it isn’t being sold, Curtis said. It’s that people usually sell heroin to make money for their own habits. When they buy it, they sell some and use the rest.

“Heroin is a closed society. It’s hard to get information on it,” he said. “Most sell it to provide for their own habits.”

Preconceived notions about heroin users go out the window. Two years ago, Curtis worked an overdose case. The victim was a university student two days away from graduation.

“When you use it, you are basically playing Russian roulette,” he said. “You don’t know the quality of the heroin you are getting. You can take the usual amount, but the stuff may be purer than you are used

to, and you will die. Or you may detox and then go back to it and try to take the amount you were taking before and built up a tolerance for. But the tolerance is gone and you will die.”

Curtis said he believes a person is ultimately responsible for what he puts in his body. Still, the law assigns responsibility to the dealer as well, and Curtis’ investigators work hard to find the person responsible.

“I tell them, you are dealing death.”

Curtis often sends the users he finds to Wisenbaker and Solutions of North Texas. Wisenbaker has nightly programs at his facility on North Locust Street and he also has an in-house program. He houses 42 people — men and women at separate facilities. Each of those must have been medically cleared to be clean, he said. They must get a job and pay their own way in the program. They must agree to work the 12-step addiction program, and they must agree to help other addicts.

Heroin and other drugs don’t just affect the user, but whole families, he said. There is a problem with parents who are trying to help their children actually enabling them to continue.

“I’m working with three mothers in Denton right now who are taking their kids to dope houses in Dallas and sitting outside while they buy and giving them the money. They tell me, ‘At least I know he’s safe. At least I know where he is.’ One mother buys for her son so he won’t get caught and go to prison. Their gravest fear is that their son will either die or get arrested. But jail is safe,” he said. “Jail is the best detox center there is. Detox is dangerous. You can die from the withdrawal symptoms. It needs medical supervision, and they get that in jail.”

The problems associated with drug abuse in a family can lead to divorce, Wisenbaker said.

“The No. 1 cause of divorce is an adult child who won’t leave home and continues to use drugs,” he said. “All three of those mothers I was talking about are divorced.”

Wisenbaker is not a fan of drugs used to get users off heroin, including methadone and suboxone.

“They are addictive themselves,” he said. “I’m surprised there are still methadone clinics, but there are. I believe in going off all the drugs. The withdrawal effects from them are just as great as heroin, if not worse.”

Davis, the sheriff’s sergeant, was a counselor before becoming a police officer and then a narcotics officer. He sees users as victims as well as criminals.

A two-year-old law makes it a crime to deliver a drug to someone that causes bodily harm or death. The penalty is one degree higher than the original crime, which is delivery of a controlled substance. Judges may not run the sentences concurrently.

That gives him another tool to use against the dealers. He treats a fatal heroin overdose like a homicide. Someone is responsible for that death, and he wants that person in prison.

Heroin is a drug of hopelessness, Davis said.

“With other addicts, it’s ‘Hey, I want to get high.’ With a heroin addict, it’s ‘I want to get right or I want to get well.’ It causes sweating, shaking, vomiting, diarrhea. With heroin, you are not trying to get high any more. You’re just trying to get well.”

Detox is “hell without the fire,” he said. It is seven days of torment, and the person can die from the symptoms.

“There are recovering heroin addicts,” he said. “I don’t know many.”

Davis can’t forget the sight of an 18-year-old boy lying dead on the carpet of a house with his stomach contents coming from his mouth and nose and matted in his hair.

“This was somebody’s kid who came from a different place than he ended up,” he said. “These are not hardened criminals. It’s our kids. It’s everybody’s kids.”

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