



AGING TODAY

Opioid Epidemic as a Shakespearean Tragedy



By Bob Roth, Managing Partner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions

The opioid epidemic has been described as the worst man made epidemic in modern medical history. The magnitude of the series of misunderstandings and missteps that led to this crisis is beyond comprehension or imagination. With hindsight being perfect vision, the Shakespearean elements and pathos of the opioid tragedy can be seen.

The Element of Disguise:

The addicts of the opioid crisis are not all homeless junkies that many envision. For many years we as a society have assumed that those who become addicted to drugs or alcohol do so out of character weakness or moral depravity. While it's true that some became addicted from recreational use, many also became addicted taking opioids exactly as prescribed by doctors. Many seeking treatment for legitimate pain had the unintended consequence of opioid use disorder, characterized by tolerance to the opioids, withdrawal symptoms, and obsessive behaviors to fuel the supply of drugs. Once addicted, people need to keep using opioids to avoid feeling awful.

The Struggle Between Good and Evil:

In an effort to alleviate suffering doctors started regarding pain as the 5th vital sign. While heart rate, body temperature, respiration rate, and blood pressure can all be measured, pain is subjective. Pain is a symptom. Pain is not a vital sign, nor is it a disease.

How did pain come to be known as the 5th vital sign? The concept originated in the VA hospital system in the late 1990s and became a Joint Commission standard in 2001. Pain was allegedly being under treated. Hospitals were forced to emphasize the assessment of pain for all patients on every shift with the (mistaken) idea that all pain must be closely monitored and treated. This is based on the (mistaken) idea that pain medication is capable of rendering patients completely pain free. This has now become an expected

use. Without physical cravings the patient is able to concentrate on implementing positive changes and healthy lifestyle patterns of behavior to rejoin society. Significant gaps between treatment need and capacity exist at the state and national levels. There is a great need to increase the number of facilities that provide this medication-assisted treatment.

Catharsis, Release of Emotions:

By and large, drug addiction is mistakenly not seen as an illness. There has been much damage done by the negative stereotype of addiction. Until recently, the image of a weak morally depraved person has encouraged a punitive perspective and hindered research of this medical condition. Many hold a negative view of methadone clinics as a way of swapping one opioid for another. To withhold treatment for the very real suffering of withdrawal is inhumane. Would we withhold medication and education from a diabetic? There simply must be more compassion and acceptance. Please encourage your friends and families to understand addiction for what it is. There is no other chronic disease that carries these emotional barriers to recovery and we must help in the healing by lifting this veil of shame.

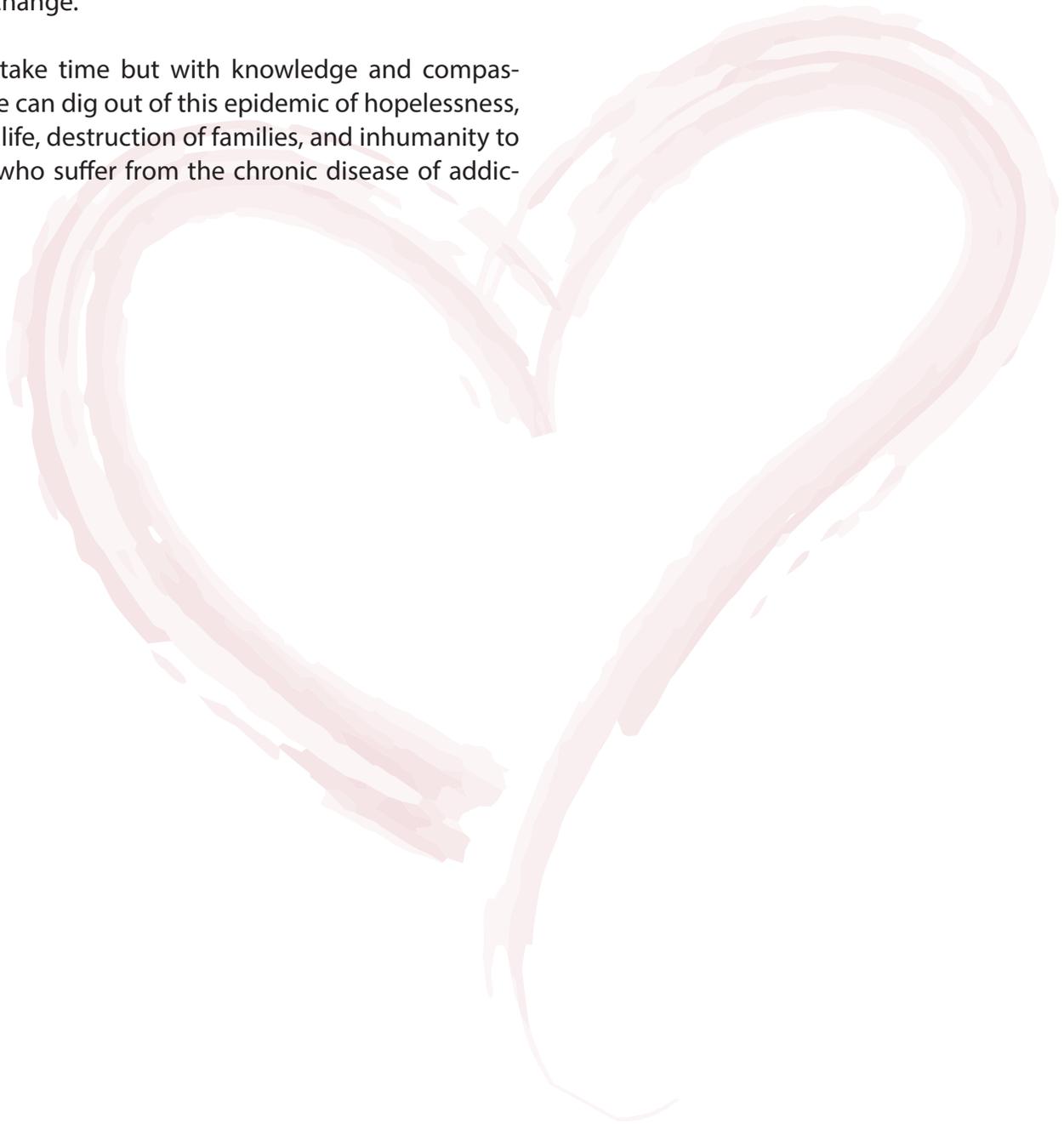
Tragic Waste, Unnecessary Loss of Life:

Arizona is one of just 10 states without a Good Samaritan Law. People who witness a drug overdose are often reluctant to seek emergency assistance for fear of prosecution of their own drug use. As a result, an individual who overdoses does not receive necessary emergency care. Through the implementation of a Good Samaritan law, bystanders are more likely to seek emergency assistance increasing the ability for law enforcement or first responders to administer naloxone to address an overdose.

Comic Relief:

The opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it is connection. Hold your family and friends close, tell them you are with them unconditionally in this challenge. Remember the good times, laugh and vow to implement change.

It will take time but with knowledge and compassion we can dig out of this epidemic of hopelessness, loss of life, destruction of families, and inhumanity to those who suffer from the chronic disease of addiction.



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