

## Seeking evolution in treatment of addiction

Thursday April 7, 2016 12:01 AM

By Samantha Tighe

Reading, PA



Reading Eagle: Jeremy Drey | Dr. William Santoro, chief of addiction medicine at Reading Health System, speaks at a panel discussion on addiction and heroin at the McGlenn Conference Center, Reading



Reading Eagle: Jeremy Drey | The Rev. Thomas J. Scornavacchi, a pastor at Atonement Lutheran Church in Wyomissing, speaks at a panel discussion on addiction and heroin.

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There is a stigma surrounding people who seek treatment for their addictions, Dr. William Santoro of the Reading Health System said Wednesday night.

Speaking as part of a panel on opiate addiction, Santoro expressed frustration with how individuals struggling with addiction were treated. Many times, they are described as addicts and that term is derogatory, he said.

"They are (viewed as) the disease instead of having the disease," he said. "The disease a person has should not define who they are."

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The Circle of Life Coalition hosted the forum at The McGlinn Conference and Spirituality Center at Alvernia University. The panel also included George J. Vogel Jr., executive director of the Council on Chemical Abuse, Berks County Commissioner Kevin S. Barnhardt and the Rev. Thomas J. Scornavacchi of Common Ground in Wyomissing. They spoke about how the treatment of addiction should evolve.

The treatment system is broken, Barnhardt said. Instead of helping those suffering from addiction seek help, those with addictions are typically arrested and thrown into the judicial system.

"Once you're in that system, it's very hard for you to get out," he said.

Things are changing, he added.

Vogel said the amount of money Berks County puts toward treatment programs is the highest in the state, even overshadowing Philadelphia County. More communities across the country, including those in Berks County, are starting to shift how they respond to those with addiction. Drugs such as naloxone, which reverse the effects of an opiate overdose, are being given to first responders.

Community organizations are working together and offering a range of services to assist those in recovery during the different stages of their lives, he said.

"Treatment is not the end point, it's the starting point," Vogel said.

But the best way to treat addiction is to cut it off before it becomes a full-blown disease, Santoro said.

In a 2009 study of risk behaviors in high school students, more than 20 percent of those surveyed said they had used prescription drugs that weren't prescribed to them or were used outside their intended purpose.

It's because people don't discard prescription drugs after they're done treatment, Santoro said. The drugs are viewed as an investment and, much like people don't want to throw away good food, many don't want to throw away prescription drugs that could still have use, he said.

That perception needs to end, he said. Doctors need to stop prescribing an excess number of pills when writing prescriptions.

"This is not Walmart, this is not Sam's Club," Santoro said. "You get what you need, not what you can get."

Of course, disposing of prescription drugs isn't easy. They're not supposed to be thrown away in the garbage or flushed down the toilet, but they also can't be returned to the doctor's office. Although there are prescription drop-off points at police stations, the odds that an 80-year-old woman will get in her car to drop off her prescribed Vicodin with the police are slim, he said.

Santoro did share a little known fact: most pharmacies are able to act as a drop-off point.

"They can legally take back products," he said.

Although steps are being taken to treat addiction, Santoro said it was important that officials keep expanding their efforts. More than 23 million people across the globe suffer from addiction, but only about two million are in a treatment program.

Just this past year, drug overdose became the leading cause of accidental death, surpassing fatal vehicle crashes, Santoro said. Nearly one-third of vehicle accidents are drug-related, he said.

For Scornavacchi, who faced addiction in his life, the road to treatment is not easy. But with the right tools, support system and structure, those with addictions can recover, he said.

"We believe addiction is a disease of the mind, the body and the spirit," he said.

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