



Rotarians destigmatize opioid recovery

Last October, Ben Lowry, an attorney in Portland, Maine, was searching the city's streets for his eldest son.

Just a year earlier, his son had been in college studying engineering when he began using drugs. Before too long, he was hooked on opioids. Lowry and his family spent more than \$100,000 on treatment and recovery programs. Finally, Lowry gave his son an ultimatum: Stop using or move out. His son moved out.

Now, hearing the wail of sirens on this cold fall night, Lowry feared the worst. "Someone said there was an overdose nearby, and I hurried over, thinking it

was my son," he says, his voice cracking with emotion. "There was a young woman dead in the street, probably in her 20s. It's a very difficult thing to see, especially when your son is living out there. You don't think it's going to happen to you until it does."

With that experience in mind, Lowry, a member of the Rotary Club of Portland, joined a group of Rotarians from Maine and New Hampshire who had come together to prevent overdose deaths. In partnership with public health agencies, the District 7780 Recovery Initiative Committee organizes

seminars to educate the community on the dangers of opioids, supports education campaigns in public schools, and raises money to train recovery coaches who assist drug users who are trying to turn their lives around.

"I don't know if I will be able to help my son," Lowry says, "but if I can help others in a similar situation, I want to."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Maine and New Hampshire recorded nearly 800 opioid overdose deaths in 2017 — a terrible toll, but a small fraction of the 47,600

opioid deaths nationwide that year. And in January 2019, in an overview of the opioid crisis, the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that about 80 percent of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids.

Robert MacKenzie, a member of the Rotary Club of Kennebunk, Maine, and that town's police chief, has also been personally touched by that crisis: One of his daughters struggled with heroin dependency and is now in recovery. But that process, he says, is a long and uncertain one.

MacKenzie was instrumental in organizing District 7780's Overdose Recognition and Response seminars. His main goal is to reduce the stigma associated with opioid use, which, he says, can be a significant barrier to drug users getting help. He thinks Rotarians can spread the message that the opioid epidemic is not a criminal justice issue, but a public health issue.

"A lot of people tend to shy away from the subject because they look at it as dirty or evil and want nothing to do with it," MacKenzie says. "They think it doesn't happen in their town. But guess what: It happens in every town."

At a November seminar at York County Community College in Wells, a town 30 miles southwest of Portland, about 70 Rotarians and community members turned out to learn how to recognize an opioid overdose and administer naloxone to counteract it. Dozens of naloxone auto-injector kits, each about the size of a deck of cards, were laid out on a table in the college's auditorium alongside information pamphlets.

Zoe Brokos, a community health promotion specialist with Portland's Public Health Division, demonstrated how to use the kits. She acknowledged that the fear of public rebuke can keep people from giving or seeking help. Making the auto-injectors more available, Brokos explained, shifts the focus to administering assistance.

"There is still a lot of stigma associated with naloxone even in the recovery community," she said. "We have to get past that and think about providing a compassionate community response. It's like having a fire extinguisher. You hope you will never have to use it, but you are really going to be glad you have it if you do."

John Bouchard, a member of the Rotary Club of Saco Bay, Maine, helped

organize one of the seminars in his community, and he attests to their ability to alter widely held perceptions. "About three-quarters of the way through the program, one of our better-known Rotarians asked the question, 'Why do we want to help these people?'" Bouchard recalls. "There was a moment of silence, and then someone at the next table shared how his neighbor's son became dependent on prescription painkillers after a knee surgery and progressed to heroin. Then someone else shared a story, and it continued on like that. Pretty soon, we realized this touches everyone."

At many of the Rotary forums, people in recovery tell their stories to underscore that point. Andrew Kiezulas, a graduate student at the University of



A member of the Rotary Club of York, Maine, Susan Gross shares the lessons she learned at the Recovery Coach Training Academy. **Opposite:** Kennebunk Police Chief Robert MacKenzie was instrumental in organizing District 7780's Overdose Recognition and Response seminars.



At the seminar in his community, says John Bouchard, “we realized this [crisis] touches everyone.” **Below:** After his son had problems with opioids, Ben Lowry got involved with educating people about the dangers of substance abuse. “If I can help others in a similar situation,” says Lowry, “I want to.”

Southern Maine, has been in recovery since 2012. He became dependent on opioids after a back injury in 2007. He now helps run an on-campus residential recovery center, and he has researched the impact of language on substance use.

“When you lay out a rap sheet on the same person, with the same history, and you change the term ‘substance abuse’ to ‘person with substance use disorder,’ it makes a big difference in how that person is treated,” Kiezulas says. “A person labeled as an abuser will more often be referred to punitive measures. But if they are labeled as having a disorder, they are more often referred to treatment, they have more time with doctors, they get access to more services, and their outcomes are significantly better.”

The 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported that 2 million people in the United States had misused prescription opioids for the first time in the past year, for a total of 11.4 million people misusing prescription opioids nationwide.

“I had one patient who said she had messed up her leg when she was 16, and they put her on oxycodone,” recalls Earl Freeman, a prevention specialist who works with the District 7780 committee. “She said it was after that first pill that she knew something had changed.”

Freeman has had his own encounters with the misplaced stigma attached to opioid use. He notes that some of his medical colleagues ask him why he wants to work with “those people.”

That attitude, he says, holds communities back from addressing the issue compassionately, and it overlooks the complicated factors that can lead an individual into dependency on a drug.

Maine’s Rotary Club of Biddeford-Saco organized a Red Ribbon Committee that coordinates with nearby towns to sponsor events in schools to teach students about the dangers of prescription and nonprescription drugs. The committee has also been working to establish a local chapter of Learn to Cope, a nonprofit support network that offers education, resources, and peer support to parents and family members dealing with a loved one’s addiction to opiates or other drugs.

Meanwhile, MacKenzie and the Kennebunk Police Department have partnered with a local nonprofit volunteer organization called Above Board to establish a Recovery Coach Training Academy. Led by certified trainers, the four-day course graduates peer mentors who are then paired with people in recovery. Susan Gross, a member of the Rotary





MacKenzie's goal in addressing audiences — such as this one at York County Senior College in Alfred, Maine — is to reduce the stigma associated with opioid use. “[People] think it doesn’t happen in their town,” he says. “But guess what: It happens in every town.”

Club of York, Maine, and the district’s Recovery Initiative Committee, recently completed the course. She shares that experience with other Rotarians and incorporates the lessons she learned into her encounters with people in recovery.

In January, MacKenzie organized a session for emergency first responders, followed by recovery coach training for 30 community members. The first responders will use the new coaches as a resource pool when they encounter people struggling with substance abuse disorder.

Ben Lowry completed the course in November. (His trainer, Jesse Harvey, is a Portland Rotarian.) Lowry encourages others to take the training. “It opened my eyes to a lot of things,” he says. “I can certainly empathize with people based

on my own experiences with my son.”

Meanwhile, after overdosing three times and getting robbed at knifepoint twice, Lowry’s son landed a job and moved back in with his father — although, according to the elder Lowry, he smokes marijuana with his friends.

“I don’t know if that’s recovery or not, but at least he’s not doing harder stuff,” says Lowry, who still endures some sleepless nights. “I hope his living with me and working is his first real step of recovery. But you don’t know. All I can do is keep trying.” — ARNOLD R. GRAHL

Fighting disease is one of the six areas of focus for Rotary. Learn more at rotary.org/en/our-causes/fighting-disease.

THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

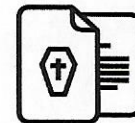
Within a 12-month period in the United States:

130+



People died every day from opioid-related drug overdoses

(estimated)



47,600

People died from overdosing on opioids

81,000



People used heroin for the first time

28,466

Deaths were attributed to overdosing on synthetic opioids other than methadone



2.1 million

People had an opioid use disorder

2 million

People misused prescription opioids for the first time



886,000

People used heroin

15,482

Deaths were attributed to overdosing on heroin



Source: Analysis of 12-month data, 2016-18, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services