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INVITED EDITORIAL

Educating Ourselves About Substance Use Disorder

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Communities across the nation, and here in Maine, continue to be ravaged by the overdose epidemic. More than 107,000 people died of overdose in 2023 nationally, including 607 here in Maine. Each of these individuals leaves behind those who mourn their loss and will forever be impacted by it.

In addition to the real human costs, the financial implications of substance use are substantial. It is estimated that the direct, indirect, and intangible costs of societal harm from substance use is $3.73 trillion per year. Of this staggering amount, health care costs this country $118.5 billion per year. And yet, research and prevention are estimated to be only $2.1 billion per year.

We, as health care providers, interact with patients who use substances every day, whether we are aware of it or not. And yet, most of us get little to no training on how to provide patient-centered, trauma-informed, non-judgmental care. Stigma at a systemic level is one reason for this problem. Bias and stigma toward people with substance use disorders (SUD) has been documented across health professions. Negative attitudes may deepen over time, perhaps due to defenses against the frustration and sense of futility when providers face a patient whose condition they are ill-equipped to manage. The impact of this bias on care has been described. This impact includes effects on SUD care-seeking, such as among patients who are pregnant, as well as premature hospital discharge, and limited engagement when interacting with providers.

Providers at Maine Health have created educational content to help address both the knowledge gaps and stigma that affect our patients’ experience with our health care system. These educational modules include a training on stigma that incorporates interviews with people with lived experience as well as MaineHealth clinical and non-clinical staff. The content also includes trainings on language and communication skills when working with this patient population. A podcast on understanding toxicology testing helps dispel some myths and misconceptions around this important tool in treatment. The education modules also cover acute pain and naloxone. All this content qualifies for the biannual Maine Board of Licensure opioid education requirement as well as the one-time Drug Enforcement Administration requirement for prescribers on SUD training. All content is free and gives continuing medical education credit. To access the modules, check out www.mainehealth.org/SUD-resources. When we take the time to learn and grow professionally, our patients with SUD benefit.

References


