

Go, Life, and Everything The Addiction Epidemic

I have two sons between the ages of 18 and 25. This weekend, we went hiking. Before that, one of them went rock climbing (the serious kind where people cling upside down to seemingly smooth surfaces with two fingers and a toe). Then both boys went out to play a pick up game of "Ultimate Frisbee." Next week, one will run in the high school track sectionals.

In short, They are both athletic. Smart, too. One's in college and one will be there next year

That puts them in a dangerous place.

Smart, active young adults are right in the middle of what I'll call the danger zone for drug abuse. Well, specifically opioid drug abuse.

Last week, several of the town's clergy and I attended a forum on the Heroin and prescription opioid drug abuse epidemic. We had heard about the opioid abuse epidemic and wanted to know how we could be of help. At the least, we thought we should know more. Frankly, however, I was listening more as a parent than a pastor.

Before I go on about what I learned, I must give this WARNING: Anything I am about to say is way over-simplified, and possibly inaccurate. You're not going to learn what you need to know from a little religion column. You know what they say about a little information being a dangerous thing.

But in this case, no information can be more dangerous. So, I do want to share some of what I heard. And what I learned is that our country is in the middle of an opioid drug abuse epidemic. It is not an epidemic of the poor, though it includes them. It is across all social and financial strata and, if anything, is especially dangerous to young folks who lead an active lifestyle.

That's because adventurers and athletes tend to get injured, and more often than you might think, they prescribed painkillers from the opioid family.

An opioid - again, way oversimplified - is a drug that chemically resembles drugs made from poppy (like opium). Some are natural, some are synthetic, but they all have a few important things in common: 1) they kill pain, 2) they can make you feel real good, even euphoric, 3) they are very addictive, and 4) it's easy to build up a tolerance to them so that you always need more than before.

Here's another little fact I didn't know. This is largely a first world problem. That is, 77% of the opioids are consumed by seven countries - and we're number one!

Why? Well, it seems doctors here prescribe a lot of it (it is more strictly regulated in Europe, so their use of opioid is much lower). Maybe you've gotten some from your doctor. Here's a list of just a few common opioid painkillers. Codeine, Lorcet, Lortab, Norco, Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, and Roxicodone. There's also Percocet which is a combination of oxycodone and acetaminophen. And let's not forget the classic: morphine.

A danger of using these painkillers is that they can lead to dependence. And with growing dependence and addiction comes risk of even worse drugs, chief among them being heroin.

As a parent, however, what caught my attention was the high potential for death by overdose. They showed a video of several parents whose beloved children - good kids - got addicted and died. That'll hit you in the gut every time.

There is good news. Police and schools are starting to get Narcan, a drug which can counter the worst effects of an opioid overdose. They said the side effects of Narcan are painfully nasty, so nobody ever wants to be given it, but it beats dying.

Also, more importantly, society is finally starting to see this addiction as a disease rather than a personal failing. Rather than "Just Say No," we're recognizing that treatment is far more important than arresting drug abusers and throwing them in jail.

There's a lot of work ahead - insurance companies try not to pay for long-term rehab, for example - but it does seem like we are finally recognizing the problem and doing something about it. As a parent, I say, "Good."

Parents can't always be there to watch out for their kids - especially as the kids become young adults. But we can give them the best information possible.

Whether as a parent or a pastor, I recognize the danger of heroin and other opioid abuse. The best advice I can give is to learn more because, like I said, you're not going to learn enough from me.