Indianapolis ERs Launch Early Intervention Program for Local Overdose Victims

January 26, 2017

A new harm reduction program in Indianapolis is using local emergency rooms as a point of intervention for injection drug users who have overdosed. Everyone who comes into the hospital after a potentially fatal injection is now approached by trained staff to discuss recovery options, get tested for hepatitis C virus (HCV) and receive an opioid overdose kit before being sent home from the hospital, the IndyStar reports.

Typically, when dealing with opioid overdoses, U.S. hospital emergency departments simply offer patients a naloxone prescription and send them on their way after a few hours of recovery. But local health workers found that few injection drug users in Indianapolis ended up filling those prescriptions and that the number of naloxone doses administered each year in the city continued to soar.

Enter Project Point, a new pilot project that began last year at local hospital network Eskenazi Health with help from a $20,000 grant from Drug Free Marion County. The community-led program hopes to help reduce substance abuse and the negative impacts of heroin and prescription painkiller addiction across the region by providing support, not just emergency care, to those struggling with opioid addiction.

Under Project Point, overdose patients in Indianapolis now receive counseling, rapid hepatitis C testing and a naloxone kit as soon as they wake up in the hospital. Thanks to a recent $700,000 grant from the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, the program also plans to hire peer recovery coaches to provide one-on-one mentoring for overdose patients to help them break the cycle of addiction.

Local harm reduction advocates also hope that widespread HCV testing through the program may someday pave the way for the adoption of a syringe exchange program in the city. Currently, Indiana state law dictates that before a county can institute a needle exchange, it must demonstrate that a public health emergency exists. According to Indianapolis health officials, a high hepatitis C rate in the community could attest to that.

So far, Project Point has reached about 90 patients since it began in February 2016. While it’s hard

to tell how many patients will remain in treatment after the intervention, thanks to the Fairbanks grant, program workers will be able to examine how successful it has been in the community.

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