Opioid Crisis Challenges Infectious Disease Doctors

Infectious disease specialists may need to address substance use disorders among their patients.

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As the opioid crisis continues to affect millions of people across the United States, infectious disease (ID) specialists may need to venture beyond treating infections like hepatitis C virus (HCV), HIV and endocarditis (an infection of the heart chambers and valves) and begin treating the underlying addiction of many of their patients.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reports that in 2016, 11.5 million Americans misused prescription opioids. That year, 2.1 million people reported trying opioids for the first time and an additional 2.1 million reported symptoms of opioid use disorder.

Meanwhile, physicians in small towns and cities are reporting major upticks in cases of infectious diseases such as HIV, hep C and endocarditis due to injection drug use. As a result, ID specialists may need to address substance use disorders among their patients.

In recent years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), heroin use in the United States has increased by more than 60 percent, and currently one in 10 HIV diagnoses in this country are among people who inject drugs. The agency also estimated that around 34,000 new cases of HCV were diagnosed in 2015, with the largest increases among young people who use injection drugs in nonurban areas.

In fact, the opioid crisis has become so severe that some experts are calling for ID physicians to include treating patients' underlying addiction among their usual responsibilities. However, doing so would require a major expansion in
ID specialists' duties.

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