

Salem Health boosts focus on reducing the opioid epidemic

Salem Health

Special to the Statesman Journal

The use of opioids — including prescription pain medication — was labeled an epidemic long before the president declared a “public health emergency” last month.

“I wasn’t living, I was just fighting the pain,” former opioid user Ron Cox said. “I literally thought I was going to die. Opioids are a one-way ticket to a place you don’t want to go.”

Everywhere you turn, this trend has been in the news. But this news isn’t fake. Statistics in Oregon alone back up the claim:

» “In 2014, enough opioids were prescribed in Oregon for nearly every person in the state to have a bottle.” — Oregon Assistant Attorney General David Hart.

» U.S. News and World Report found that in Oregon, more drug poisoning deaths involve prescription opioids than any other type of drug.

» The Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project reports that Oregonians age 65 and older are landing in the hospital for opioid overdoses, abuse, dependence and adverse effects at a greater rate than any other state.

Salem Health is fighting back. Salem Health hosted the 2017 Pain Summit in September, sponsored by the Oregon Coalition for Responsible Use of Meds, which attracted 200 specialists from the medical, pharmacy, dental, behavioral health and addiction fields. They are creating a regional action plan to reduce prescription drug abuse, misuse and overdose in Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties. Salem Health’s Pain Clinic, which helps people like Cox, has embraced four goals: reducing pills in circulation, improving the disposal of unused meds, expanding access to treatment and educating the public about the opioid crisis. It has become a major partner in OrCRUM.

“We saw renewed commitment at the Summit to tackle this crisis locally,” said Josh Steenstra, Pain Clinic manager. “We’re creating a ‘to do’ list and working with hospitals and clinics to identify local leaders to step up.”

The clinic follows a two-pronged approach: Following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Guideline to Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain, combined with a holistic approach to reduce dependency through all aspects of health — physical, social and mental.

“The biggest hurdle we help patients overcome is accepting they have a problem with pain medication,” Dr. Paul Coelho said. “After all, nobody wants to be labeled a drug addict, especially if they’re using prescribed drugs.”

Opioids — such as hydrocodone and oxycodone — are beneficial when taken for fewer than three months, Coelho noted. Studies show that long-term use doesn’t improve function.

“It’s a vicious cycle because the brain



Tessie and Ron Cox are pictured. Ron is a former opioid user who got help at Salem Health’s Pain Clinic.

SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The opioid crisis is a complicated story with many factors leading to a “perfect storm” of epidemic misuse and deadly overdose.

The palliative care movement of the 1990s led to new laws that helped popularize prescribing controlled pain medications without the sanction of the Oregon Medical Board. At that time, the science of prescription opioid addiction wasn’t well-known.



For years, many doctors saw opioids as the easiest answer to help desperate patients get relief quickly.



With an increase in prescriptions, more patients became dependent on them.

With more drugs in circulation, more people had access to them, feeding the addiction cycle further. Addicts began “doctor shopping” to take more than prescribed doses.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM NOW?

Aging baby boomers have more aches and pains, increasing demand for opioids. It’s estimated that the population over age 80 will double in the next 20 years — meaning even more people will need access to safe, effective pain-control.

Online

Learn more about Salem Health’s Pain Clinic at salemhealth.org/services/pain-clinic

likes the drug, so the body tells the brain it wants more, just to feel normal,” Coelho said. “Our approach is to change the brain signals to change the pain cycle, similar to the classic 12-step recovery process.”

The clinic aims to help patients understand their pain, not feel stigmatized and reduce dependency by prescribing other medications and teaching other options.

Salem Health offers care to people in and around Oregon’s mid-Willamette Valley. It comprises hospitals in Salem and Dallas, a medical group of primary and specialty care providers, plus other affiliated services. Visit salemhealth.org.