

Self-help: Addicts buying Suboxone on street

Jona Ison, Gannett Ohio 7:21 a.m. EST December 13, 2014



(Photo: Jason J. Molyet/Gannett Ohio)

All Chris Evers knew was he wanted to get clean.

By the time he embraced that thought, it was 2011, and the court already had sent Evers, a Chillicothe native who now lives in Wayne County, to treatment three times instead of prison.

"Old friends, old habits don't die so easily," he said.

Evers decided he wanted to try Suboxone, a drug used to aid treatment of opiate addiction, but couldn't afford it legally. So he began buying it illegally on the streets.

He's not the only one. In Scioto County, once the epicenter of prescription pain pill abuse in Ohio, Sheriff Marty Donini said the black market for Suboxone has exploded.

"I'm not so sure we've accomplished anything," Donini said earlier this year, noting pain clinics have been replaced by Suboxone clinics. "It seems like all the money and resources being pumped into drug addiction, they're fighting drugs with drugs. I don't think they're solving the issue. They're making people addicted to another drug."

Getting hooked

In 2005, Evers, now 25, was a junior at Zane Trace High School in Ross County when he got hooked on prescription painkillers. His dependency began with his wisdom teeth being pulled and ended with prison.

"(By graduation), it was to the point where I needed them to get through the day OK," Evers said.

Without Percocet or some other kind of opiate, Evers would become physically ill. The addiction led him to stealing his grandmother's oxycodone in 2008 and into the Ross County Common Pleas Court.

In a plea deal, Evers was sentenced to a secured treatment facility, STAR in Scioto County, instead of prison. He was sent for a second time in 2010, but was back before the judge within a year.

"When I was at STAR, I never treated my addiction. You do what you have to to get out. Fake it until you make it," he said.

Evers somehow got another chance, this time 120 days in jail and six months at a halfway house in Chillicothe. He still took pain pills but also began buying Suboxone, a drug used in addiction treatment, on the street. Suboxone was cheaper and helped him with withdrawal symptoms between getting prescription opiates.

He didn't get serious about getting clean until he collapsed and nearly died from an overdose on Chillicothe's Main Street.

"That was the day I said I'm going to change," Evers said.

He sought Suboxone treatment, but at that time, it wasn't covered by insurance. He couldn't afford a \$200 upfront cash fee to see the doctor or a \$600 prescription. However, Evers was able to find the money to get Suboxone on the street, buying a dose or two at a time and splitting each one to last longer.

"I really wanted to be clean. I was tired of disappointing my family," Evers said.

The change of heart wasn't enough; past deeds caught up with him in the form of two felony indictments on thefts related to supporting his opiate habit. In 2012, Evers was sent to prison.

Black market treatment

Illegal Suboxone use has been ongoing since at least 2005, when the Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring Network came across a handful of reports while surveying for its annual Surveillance of Drug Abuse Trends report.

Since then, reports of Suboxone abuse have risen even though the medication predominantly prescribed and available is a dissolving film instead of a pill. The change in delivery method of the drug was an attempt to make the drug more difficult to abuse.

Even so, according to the network's 2014 report, officials across the state are reporting a high availability of Suboxone, and all areas but the Toledo region indicate they've seen an increase since 2013.

The typical person buying Suboxone on the street is like Evers had been — "self-medicating to wean off heroin or prescription opioids or to avoid withdrawal between highs," according to the network's report.

The challenge with treatment for opiate addiction is the severity of withdrawal symptoms, said Jennifer Turnes, senior vice president of Behavioral Healthcare Partners of Central Ohio in Newark.

"Too often, this can lead individuals to seek out other substances (like Suboxone) in an attempt to avoid the withdrawal symptoms or to replace the supposed high they get with opiates," Turnes said.

Evers said Suboxone made him feel normal.

"I didn't wake up and (crave) them. I actually felt alive. My judgment was not clouded whatsoever," he said.

Suboxone works by blocking opioid receptors in the brain and minimizing withdrawal symptoms.

While Donini's not alone in his views that medication-assisted treatment just replaces one drug with another, the National Institute on Drug Abuse at the National Institute of Health looks at it differently.

The institute views its use, and other addiction treatments, as ways of treating a chronic disease, not unlike approaches for diabetes and hypertension in which medication is used for ongoing treatment. However, Suboxone is designed to work hand in hand with counseling to address underlying issues.

"It is critical that these medications are provided in conjunction with treatment proven effective with this population," Turnes said. "We do understand the concerns regarding the availability of such medications for illegal use on the street. Unfortunately, this is a reality that further complicates an already sophisticated social problem."

And that lack of counseling is where the issue lies, said Juni Johnson, executive director of the Paint Valley Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Board.

"I've seen providers that look and smell like a pill mill. ... They're not certified by the state to provide counseling and they take cash only," Johnson said.

House Bill 378 aims to curb diversion of drugs containing buprenorphine, such as Suboxone, onto the street and require doctors prescribing it to provide counseling. The House unanimously passed the legislation earlier this month, and it is now before the Senate.

Moving on and up

Evers ultimately quit without Suboxone; there is no medically assisted addiction treatment in prison. He instead completed programming that focused on changing the way he thinks, and he became a mentor in a faith-based program called Kairos Torch.

About a month ago, Evers was released and has moved in with family in Creston, where he's working on their tilapia farm.

"This is my blessing," he said.

This time, Evers feels he has the proper support to remain in recovery. He's still regularly attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings and is set to begin classes at the University of Akron in January. His goal is to use his experience to help others struggling with addiction by becoming a counselor.

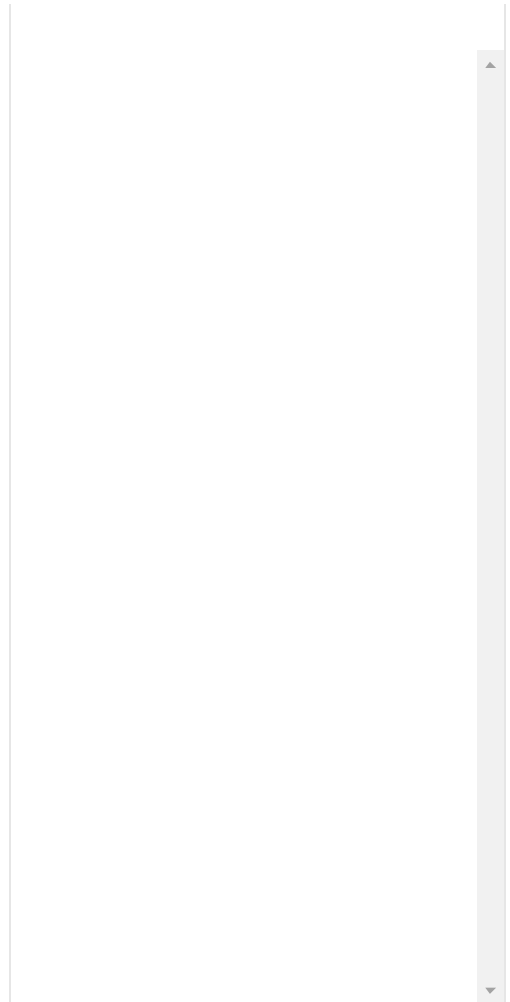
"It's always going to be a part of me, but I know how to handle it now," he said.

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