Inspira Health Network joins the fight against opioid abuse

By John DiAngelo, Inspira Health Network President and CEO

Many communities across the nation are facing a serious opioid and heroin crisis and our region is not immune. It may surprise you to learn that southern New Jersey has the highest rate of overdose deaths per capita in the state. Gloucester County's mortality rate from opioid overdose ranks among New Jersey's highest, with Cumberland and Salem counties not far behind.

At Inspira Health Network, we are committed to improving the lives of everyone we serve and sometimes that means reaching out beyond the walls of our network. That is why we recently launched a program to directly respond to this drug epidemic that is affecting families in South Jersey.

One way we are making an impact is by educating people about the dangers of unused prescription medications and how to safely dispose of them. The National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that nearly half of all heroin users start by abusing prescription drugs. While many of us may have old prescription drugs in our medicine cabinets, we may not have considered the serious threat they pose. Teenagers and young adults are at a dangerously high risk for experimenting or abusing medications that are not even prescribed to them.

Last year, I learned about a product that allows anyone to easily and safely neutralize unwanted prescription medications. The Southwest Council presented the Deterra Drug Deactivation System at a meeting of the Cumberland, Salem, Gloucester Health and Wellness Alliance and I quickly realized that this tool could make a great impact on our communities.

Deterra is available in a small pouch containing a carbon-like substance that neutralizes prescription drugs when warm water is added. Once it is sealed, it can be thrown away in your trash without affecting the environment. Deterra is also available in large buckets that can be used at community events, allowing dozens of community members to safely dispose of their medications.

In an effort to prevent the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs, Inspira is partnering with the Health and Wellness Alliance and the Southwest Council to provide our region with free access to Deterra. In fact, Inspira has purchased 50,000 Deterra pouches for the benefit of our communities. Together with our partners, we are strategically distributing these pouches to agencies and people at no cost where we feel it will do the most good to address the opioid epidemic in our region.

By partnering with community agencies, home care and hospice workers, funeral homes, realtors and others, we hope to reduce the amount of old or unused prescription drugs in homes and stop addiction before it begins.

For our neighbors who may already be suffering with addiction, Inspira has also made a commitment to provide free Narcan to police officers in Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem counties. Narcan is a drug usually administered as a nasal spray that can save lives by reversing the effects of a heroin or opiate-based narcotics overdose. However; it does need to be used quickly after an overdose begins, so our police, paramedics and other emergency personnel need access to Narcan in the field.

That is why we have partnered with the prosecutors' offices in Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem counties to supply them with Narcan at no cost and train our local police officers to use it. For those who have received Narcan during an overdose, it offers a second chance at life.

Ultimately, I think that is what is most meaningful to me about these initiatives. The programs and the partnerships we've developed through the Health and Wellness Alliance offer our communities a new spirit of optimism. I believe that this commitment will have a positive impact and fulfill our mission of improving the lives of those we serve.

For more information please visit our site at InspiraHealthNetwork.org, or the Cumberland, Salem, Gloucester Health and Wellness Alliance web site at GetHealthyCumberlandSalem.org.

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