Drug overdoses on the rise in Allegheny County. What’s in your medicine cabinet?

Donald S. Burke, MD

When we started to analyze the data, I was struck by the increasing death rates, particularly from overdoses. The rates started to increase dramatically about 10 years ago. Now, drug overdoses are the leading cause of death among middle-aged Pennsylvanians.

This increase happened among men and women, most age groups and all in category. So, why has heroin abuse increased so quickly? Dr. Burke found that, about 15 years ago, doctors started prescribing slow-acting painkillers, including drugs like OxyContin (the brand name of a certain kind of opioid). The belief was that these drugs were not addictive. At the same time, doctors encouraged people to use both more and more frequently and complained about treatment plans. Doctors were prescribing more of the opioid-like drugs. The slow-acting painkillers were becoming more widely used. People were started selling them illegally. Heroin use became an epidemic. By 2015, health care was available. It became cheaper to use heroin than to use OxyContin. Through research programs, President Obama’s new budget calls for $1.1 billion over the next several years for increased research, treatment and prescription drug overdose prevention. In its position as dean of Pitt Public Health, Dr. Burke has already funded several new research projects, including studies to find new ways to improve the distribution of naloxone, an emergency-use drug that can reverse drug overdoses; learn from the drugs that abuse these for their effects on the community; prescription patterns and identify the patterns that often lead to overdoses; to use social media and other creative methods to talk about drug use and to look at patterns of death in detail in order to see where the clusters are and how these patterns are changing over time. Dr. Burke knows the response to help predict which interventions will work best and to evaluate how well the interventions work.

The Research Participant Registry is a database of people who live in Allegheny County. The registry allows any licensed health care professionals, including doctors and nurses, to contact people who may witness drug overdoses. To those who may witness an overdose, go to http://www.achd.net/overdoseprevention/ to read about another overdose case, to find contacts and other information.

“Heroin has been such a problem, and there are many treatment options available. I don’t want to read about another overdose case,” Burke said. “Thank you so much for your time, Ms. Bush. Our topic for April is nutrition. It’s a unique area of health in which we can all save lives and reduce the burden of disease.”

To avoid becoming addicted, talk to a health care professional. There are many treatment options available, including counseling and other forms of therapy. To learn more, visit http://www.achd.net/overdoseprevention/.