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Implementation of Attending Narcotics Anonymous Meetings in Addiction Medicine Curriculum

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Background

Following the the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, opioid-related deaths were augmented, highlighting an area of concern for the state of New Jersey. Although the state has taken steps to combat the number of opioid-related deaths, this continues to be a problem highlighting the need for increased interventions to decrease the number of opioid-related deaths and to improve long-term healthcare outcomes.

- From January 1, 2023 – February 28, 2023, New Jersey has had a total of 440 total suspected drug-related deaths.¹
- In 2022, there was a total of nearly 2900 suspected drug-related deaths.¹
- Camden County (2019) showed the highest overdose rates per capita in the state of New Jersey.

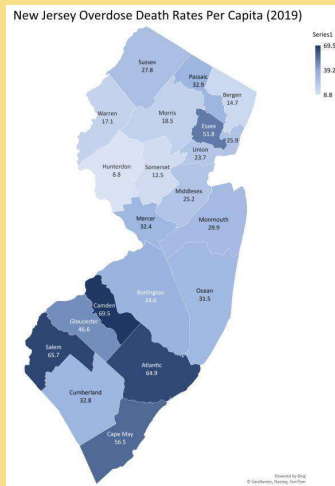


Image 1. Highlights overdose death rate per capita (2019) in the state of New Jersey.

Barrier to ending the Opioid Epidemic? Stigma.

Rates of stigma surrounding addiction, and more specifically, opioid addiction, are high within the general population and amongst healthcare professionals, as well.^{2,3} A national survey conducted in 2016 revealed that two-thirds of primary care physicians surveyed viewed people with opioid use disorder as dangerous.²

With those experiencing substance abuse disorder, the anticipation and fear of bias contributes to isolation, hiding high-risk activities, and prevents individuals from seeking help or treatment, such as harm-reduction programs.² In a healthcare setting, existing stigma prevents high-quality treatment infrastructure and contributes to suboptimal care for individuals suffering with addiction.²

Objective

For student doctors interested in completing an Area of Distinction (AOD) in Addiction Medicine, it is beneficial to have early exposure to the community that they want to serve. By implementing attendance at Narcotics Anonymous meetings into the curriculum, students will be able to engage with people suffering with addiction outside of a healthcare setting, providing exposure to the differences in how addiction affects members of our community. This intervention provides an opportunity for medical students to listen to the experiences of people dealing with substance abuse disorder, helping dispel stigmas and implicit biases that may exist early in a student's medical career.

Proposed Intervention and Methods

Step 1: Literature Reviews and Interviews. Conduct a literature review to determine current trends regarding stigma surrounding recovery. Interview local members of recovery community to determine if they are willing to have more physicians and healthcare providers attend NA meetings to listen to their experience.



Step 2: Partnering Rowan-Virtua SOM with local community Narcotics Anonymous organizations, students will be required to attend a certain number of open NA meetings in order to get their Area of Distinction in Addiction Medicine. The idea behind this is to provide exposure earlier in a physician's training to reduce the stigma surrounding addiction and treatment.



Step 3: After attending meetings, students will be required to write a short reflection, discussing their experience, reflecting on bias they may have/have previously had, and how they can use that practical knowledge when treating patients in the future.



Image 2. Flyer created to prepare students prior to attending NA meetings.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal of this intervention is to expose medical students to the various ways the addiction can present itself. By allowing medical students to listen to the experiences of members of the community who are in recovery, biases surrounding addiction can slowly be dispelled. Along with this, patients may feel more comfortable confiding in their healthcare providers and obtaining help, thereby improving healthcare outcomes and patient retention.

References

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2. Meginty EE, Barry CL. Stigma Reduction to Combat the Addiction Crisis — Developing an Evidence Base. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2020;382(14):1291-1292. doi:10.1056/nejmp2000227
3. Volkow ND. Stigma and the Toll of Addiction. *N Engl J Med*. 2020;382(14):1289-1290. doi:10.1056/NEJMp1917360