

Meth symposium: It's everyone's problem

Katharhynn Heidelberg

MONTROSE - When Nicolas Taylor first came to Montrose in 1997, he was confident he'd be able to treat whatever problems substance-addicted clients threw his way, but he hadn't reckoned with the power of methamphetamine, an illegal psycho stimulant that now stalks virtually every community in America.

"Meth had hit the community. Things were a little different than I anticipated them to be," he said to public health, safety, law enforcement, education and legal professionals Friday at the Pavilion during a methamphetamine symposium. "I felt completely overwhelmed trying to help these people. The using community has an insidious quality about it."

Taylor, who now knows more than he'd like about the drug, addressed the biological, psychological and sociological effects of meth. For those who think he might be overstating the problem, the panel of experts and former addicts who joined Taylor had this unspoken retort: "You're wrong."

Comprehensive approach needed

"It's a nationwide problem. It's anywhere and everywhere," North Metro (Denver) Task Force chemist Lynn Riemer, "the Martha Stewart of meth labs," said.

Meth is formed from a toxic brew of common household chemicals that is used to distill the active ingredient, pseudoephedrine, from cold tablets and other sources. Meth destroys the body, erodes tooth enamel and drops gum lines. Volatile chemical reactions that occur during its manufacture can cause explosions, contaminate everyone and everything in a "cook's" residence, and release vapors more deadly than sarin nerve gas.

Meth users - the slang term is "tweakers" - often put everything from family to work on hold for just one more hit. Some steal to support the habit; others simply steal the ingredients used in meth. And, because meth is a schedule II controlled substance, the possession, use, distribution, manufacture, or intent to do any of these things, is chargeable as a felony. Convictions follow offenders for years, and their legal proceedings clog taxpayer-funded court systems and prisons.

"I had what people considered a normal family," said Tonya Wheeler, president of Advocates for Recovery, in debunking the prevalent myth that meth abuse is only a problem for the poor or under-educated. "We had money. We had what I needed."

Wheeler first tried alcohol and pot at the age of 12. At age 18, she took her first hit of meth and when her parents forced her into treatment, she simply waited until she could call her dealer/boyfriend, whom she later married - a "match made in heaven" that sent her life to hell.

"My life went out of control," she said. "I just knew I was going to die."

Wheeler was eventually arrested, but, she said, was never made to undergo drug testing. She was later booted from her second treatment program because she had no insurance. Finally, through outpatient treatment, Wheeler cleaned up in 1990. She now works as a substance abuse counselor.

But Taylor and Wheeler weren't at the symposium to wring their hands about the problem. They used their stories to drive home the need for a comprehensive approach. After all, if meth impacts all levels of society, shouldn't all levels of society work together to combat it?

"No one can do it alone," said Janet Wood, director of the alcohol and drug abuse division of the Colorado Department of Human Services, in speaking of drug's far-reaching impact. "There is no simple solution."

Children victimized by parents' use

Possibly no one feels that impact more painfully than the children trapped in meth homes, and that makes the need for cooperation all the more crucial. Lt. Lori Moriarty, commander of the North Metro Task Force, told of going to one home five times before ever discovering a 10-year-old boy lived there. Why did it take so long? At the time, there was a surprising lack of communication between Social Services and police.

"This is where teamwork needs to start," Moriarty said.

It works well in Denver, where police now call Social Services before raiding a drug house. This procedure lets them know whether children are present, and often, Social Services is able to give additional information.

What's also changed is the level of awareness of meth children among other professionals. In 1997, a child disclosed sexual abuse to school officials and also told them his parents made meth. But a lack of meth awareness at the time meant the school didn't understand what he was talking about and his other complaint couldn't be corroborated.

Finally, in 2004, officers acting on another tip found a meth lab...and video evidence of "horrific" sexual assault that ultimately netted the boy's father a 100-year prison term.

Come together

Educating all levels of communities - medical, public health, business, public safety, human services and treatment professionals - is crucial, presenters said Friday.

"What would it take to make a whole community get on the prevention bandwagon?" asked Lynn Westgert, director of the San Juan Basin Public Health Department. "We need to recognize we're doing battle with meth. Meth is here. This drug is the worst of the worst."

Education extends beyond the police department doors and into the business community.

"The business community is going to be on the frontlines when people come in to buy precursors for meth," Wood said.

For a comprehensive approach to be successful, everyone from retail clerks to real estate agents need to know the signs that meth is being made-whether it's the vast number of matchbooks and Heet gasoline additive being purchased, or the tell-tale yellow iodine stains in a rental home or motel room that spell contamination.

Treatment and prevention professionals also have to know what they're dealing with, Taylor said. The good news is, things have changed since 1997, when there was no specific treatment model for meth (original models were based on cocaine abuse treatment). With more models, including intensive in- and out-patient treatment options, what rural Colorado now has is "the MacGyver approach-the best we can do with what's available," he said.

Contact Katharhynn Heidelberg via e-mail at

katharhynn@montrosepress.com