Why Am I Needed?

Historically, in the US, the approach to treating substance use disorders has been a strict abstinence-based protocol. Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) involves the use of medications to treat substance use disorders (SUD). Methadone and Suboxone (buprenorphine) are two medications that have been proven effective in treating opioid dependence. Typically, treatment centers have been hesitant to use pharmacotherapies for opioid dependence. And while it may seem inappropriate to treat SUD with medication, the MAT practice has been found to have better treatment outcomes than abstinence-based programs.

In the criminal justice system, pharmacotherapy is not always understood and MAT programs present challenges to parole and probation officers attempts to monitor newly released inmates. The Criminal Justice Drug Abuse Treatment Studies (CJ-DATS) is a National Network for the Study of Drug Abuse Treatment for Offenders. This network has initiated research called Medication-Assisted Treatment Implementation in Community Correctional Environments (MATICCE). MATICCE has piloted programs in several states attempting to implement medication-assisted treatment within correctional facilities.* In the MATICCE study, criminal justice personnel participate in training about addiction pharmacotherapies. Additionally, the leadership of the correctional agencies and substance use disorder treatment facilities complete a joint strategic planning process together in order to identify and resolve barriers to collaboration on behalf of clients across the two systems.

The Centre for Research Excellence into Injecting Drug Use (CREIDU) reports that in Australia half the prison population consists of intravenous drug users. Although the intravenous drug use may cease somewhat while incarcerated, many return to injecting when they are released. This places the released inmate at high risk of a fatal overdose, committing repeat offenses, and numerous health concerns that impact public health. CREIDU advocates for the initiation of Medication-Assisted Treatment for prisoners while incarcerated and extend through release and parole.

The World Health Organization (WHO) of Europe recently reported that many released prisoners die within weeks after leaving jail. The reason for this is reduced tolerance to drugs after a period of abstinence and combining multiple substances which can double the overdose risk. WHO suggested pre-release counseling specific to substance use problems, post-release follow-up and a greater ability to identify those at risk when leaving correctional facilities.

Approximately 1.2 million people involved with the justice system have an addiction to drugs or alcohol.* The National Association of Drug Court Professionals reports that this year, “2,734 Drug Courts will serve over 136,000 people”. Drug Courts offer a diversion option from lengthy jail and prison sentences for those with substance use problems. Clients will attend a year-long intensive group therapy program which also closely monitors behavior and abstinence from substances ensuring strict adherence to probation stipulations.

Many programs also insist that clients attend support groups in addition to counseling sessions. A judge oversees all participants and meets with clients regularly in a court room setting. Substance use counselors attend with their clients to report what progress has been made. Random drug screens are performed frequently. The drug court structure rewards compliant behavior and consistent progress by lessening sessions and court time requirements. However, sanctions are given if clients fail a drug screen or do not attend counseling sessions. Drug Court programs recognize that addiction is a chronic brain disease which requires lengthy treatment regiments to sustain long-term remission. Through Drug Court, the external motivation to achieve recovery begins what is hoped to become overtime an internalized abstinent life-style.*

What Needs To Be Done?

- Implement education and training programs about addiction and Medication-Assisted Treatment for all working in the criminal justice system.

- Distribute Naloxone Rescue Kits to corrections officers, parole and probation officers, and released inmates who have a history of SUD and their loved ones.

- Recognize the warning signs and high risk situations of overdose for inmates and ex-inmates.

- Include harm reduction training in pre-release preparation programs.

- Consider Drug Court as an option to be explored.

- Collaborate with MAT programs that will assist with monitoring of released inmates through monthly reports and urinalysis.

- Gain factual information to effect influence in changing the “criminal justice system to break the cycle of drug use, crime, and incarceration”.

- Take Correctly, Store Securely, Dispose Properly, Never Share.™

What Do I Need to Know?

SUD is a major issue for the criminal justice system. Providing and supporting evidence-based treatment may help someone to enter and stay in recovery and avoid relapsing to drug use and the criminal activities associated with drug use.

If a person is already involved in a MAT program, disrupting their treatment could cause significant negative life changes.

For more information visit projectlazarus.org or call +1.336.667.8100

*Retrieved from:
http://www.nadcp.org/learn/what-are-drug-courts
http://www.drugabuse.gov/justice-system-research-initiatives
www.wh.gov/DrugPolicyReform
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