

Opioid addiction treatment in the Miami community

By AMANDA TORRES

On May 21, University of Miami Miller School of Medicine led “Fighting Opioid Addiction: Integrating State of the Art Science Treatment into Patient Care.” Guest speakers from our own community in Miami and from states like New York, Connecticut, Boston and Pennsylvania attended the symposium, as well an intrigued and attentive audience.

Edward Nunes, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center and New York State Psychiatric Institute, said that mediated doses of methadone, buprenorphine or naltrexone has shown to be effective in not only replacing opioids, but also hindering its effects.

There is evidence that some can avoid relapses on their own, but “medication strategies work for many people with opioid abuse disorder,” Nunes said.

Guest speakers emphasized their agreement with Nunes in their talks. But while mediated-assisted treatment (MAT) could be the most effective approach, methadone, specifically, is highly regulated.

Jeri Beth Cohen, a judge at the Dependency Division of the Juvenile Court and the Miami-Dade County Adult Criminal Drug Court, said that the primary medications used in Dade County are buprenorphine medications called Subutex, Suboxone and naltrexone medications like Vivitrol. While buprenorphine and naltrexone are available, methadone is difficult to obtain.

“Why don’t we use methadone?” Cohen said. “We would love to use methadone, but there is currently only one private methadone provider in Dade County.”

Cohen also stressed in her presentation, “Integrating Medication Assisted Treatment into the Miami-Dade Court,” that after she sent people from drug courts to emergency rooms for treatment, some had to wait 12 to 15 hours to get treated, resulting in them leaving and getting sicker.

After making this observation, Cohen obtained a 2.5-million-dollar grant to open an on-demand clinic. Cohen contacted Jackson Memorial Hospital and worked alongside Patricia Ares-Romero, chief medical officer at Jackson Behavioral Health Hospital, to set up the clinic that would be open five days a week.

Now that the MAT clinic is open, Cohen said that Suboxone and Subutex are provided to people coming from drug courts. These medications not only provide stabilization, but help with detox and maintenance. Medical attention and therapy are available, with the help of on-site psychiatrists and nurse practitioners. The clinic also makes an effort to contact families from those seeking treatment to provide support.

According to Cohen, the clinic “stopped the cascade effect of losing them at intake and we started retaining them at treatment. It was transformational for our courts.”

Patricia Ares-Romero, M.D., chief medical officer at Jackson Behavioral Health Hospital, elaborated on the services that the Jackson Behavioral Health Hospital MAT Clinic has to offer to patients. Instant services include: “detoxification, medication-assisted treatment maintenance, a

complete psychiatric evaluation, individual and group therapy, medical services: family practice from advanced registered nurse practitioners, University of Miami medical partners, as well as licensed clinical social workers,” who would be ready to help.

Cohen’s and Ares-Romero’s presentation can be found [here](#).

Besides the MAT Clinic, the IDEA Exchange is another prominent program in the Miami community.

Hansel Tookes, M.D., M.P.H, the medical director of the [IDEA Exchange](#) program and an assistant professor of clinical medicine at the University of Miami, talked about [“Connecting Patients to Care by Providing Specialized Services: Syringe Service Programs \(SSPs\).”](#)

The purpose of Tookes’ IDEA Exchange Program, which doors opened on December 1, 2016, is to reduce the spread of infections and viruses and to promote health by offering people to trade in used syringes with new ones in return.

“We have 735 people who have enrolled so far,” Tookes said. “We have taken 152,953 syringes off the streets in exchange for 141,553.”

IDEA Exchange has also partnered with their managing entity for their substance abuse programs to distribute Narcan, a nasal spray used to treat overdoses, to the participants of the program. According to Tookes, “we have handed out over 1,000 boxes, with 553 reversals.”

As IDEA Exchange is going to have its second year anniversary in December, the intent is to make the service available state wide. Tookes also spoke about recent milestones, like the “major opioid bill that was passed. In Florida, effective July 1, 2018, we can only prescribe three days of opioids to our patients.”

While the MAT Clinic and IDEA Exchange program are making differences to reduce the opioid epidemic in the Miami community, there are other aspects to consider and improve.

Sharleen M. Traynor, M.P.H., an epidemiologist and a Ph.D. student at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, focused her talk on [“Data-driven responses to the opioid crisis: Improving local surveillance to guide public action.”](#)

“Prior to coming to UM, I worked for several years as an applied epidemiologist at a local county health department,” Traynor said. “It was during this time that I recognized the importance of having a robust public health surveillance system and how having timely sharing of information among local partners was critical in being able to have an effective response to public health events.”

According to Traynor, thinking of methods to improve and conduct more rapid surveillance and tying that to the opioid epidemic “can improve public health action.”

Nunes, Cohen, Ares-Romero, Tookes, and Traynor were among the many guest speakers who presented at “Fighting Opioid Addiction: Integrating State of the Art Treatment into Patient Care.”

To watch the symposium, please click [here](#).

