

Fighting rise in overdose deaths, addiction requires addressing mental illness too

The Baltimore Sun recently shared the findings of the Maryland Opioid Operational Command Center's report that more than 2,700 Marylanders died due to drug and alcohol overdoses in 2020 ("A record number of fatal overdoses ravaged Maryland in 2020, 'exacerbated' by COVID-19 pandemic, report shows," April 13). As the director of addiction services for Sheppard Pratt, I have been on the front lines of the region's opioid and substance use epidemic for many years. In that time, I have observed the human toll of this health crisis. Overdose deaths and the prevalence of individuals who struggle with addiction has grown exponentially since the early 2000s with a drastic increase around 2013. During this spike, government and community leaders of every level were alarmed and, appropriately, mitigation efforts followed. Thanks to this groundswell of integrated care that included new legislation and funding for community programs and social services, 2019 was the first year in which we observed a slight decrease in overdose deaths.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. From April through December 2020, during the height of COVID-19-related closures and restrictions on gatherings, Maryland OOC reported a 20.8% increase in overdoses compared to the same period during 2019. As a practitioner, this is heartbreaking. And this doesn't even tell the full story. While opiates may get a lot of focus because they are more lethal than other drugs, I have observed a concerning increase in the misuse of other substances. Alcohol, marijuana and cocaine use have skyrocketed throughout the pandemic. While these substances may not cause immediate death, their overuse on a regular, long-term basis creates significant health consequences.

To respond to this health crisis, we need to understand it. Most individuals who struggle with addiction usually have a co-occurring mental health condition. We must address both addiction and mental illness simultaneously in order to make progress in this crisis. Further, when an individual expresses a desire to seek treatment, you often have a very limited window during which they are interested in changing their behavior. Therefore, it is critically important that we make addiction treatment as accessible as possible, such as through telehealth or making screenings and services available where individuals apply for public services. Through accessible and integrated mental health and addictions services, we can continue to make progress toward ending the opioid epidemic, in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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