

How Opioid Treatment Has Fueled the Epidemic!

By Christopher B. Smithers

Treating addiction, especially opioid addiction, is as challenging as treating cancer. For more than half a century the Smithers Foundation has been supporting research and treatment of alcoholism and substance abuse. What is important and what must remain consistent in the field of recovery, is the employ of medical and psychiatric personnel and professionals trained in this field who are educated in the latest advances in addiction treatment and to make sure that an addict who wants help is first examined and then treated by these experts.

Our concern is that in the growing field of so called "sober houses" and many treatment centers you find none of this. We're referring to poorly regulated and unprofessional facilities operated by profiteers. It is not uncommon for an overdose victim to be a current or former resident of a sober house or unprofessional facility.

We may be painting with a wide brush but unfortunately the sober house and treatment center run by medical professionals is a rarity. The Internet is full of glossy advertisements offering comfortable residential conditions.

One "upscale sober living" facility in New York offers this:

We offer First Class amenities including our own personal chef, full maid service, and weekly sober activities. A distinctive attribute of the house is the calm and peaceful ambiance. Serenity can be found in our beautiful, tranquil outdoor courtyard.

Their extensive website makes no mention of medical professionals on staff.

Typically, these facilities do not offer much medical care or quality counseling or oversight of the residents and do not employ professionals or a trained medical staff. Addicts and families are fooled into thinking that this luxury sounding place is the way to sobriety for themselves or their loved one when in reality they are unknowingly putting themselves or their loved one in another unhealthy situation.

We believe that an attractive environment with quality amenities is important, but without a professional medical staff on duty 24/7 this is just a Trojan horse.

Often times the "counselors" are those who are out of rehab a few years more than the new residents of the facility. They are not trained medical doctors, nor are they properly trained professionals in the treatment field. A former resident who had been there for a stay becomes the counselor for someone newly arrived. This practice is based on the AA and NA model of someone who has been sober longer being qualified to take a newer arrival through the 12 steps to sobriety. While AA's/NA methodology, using group support, is only 20% successful when employed by and with a middle-aged population in conjunction with the 12 steps, it is proving to be even less successful with today's younger generation addicted to opioids.

It is our view that to be legitimate and effective, sober houses and treatment centers must meet these minimal requirements:

- Medical personnel, including psychiatrists, trained in treating addiction and supporting recovery, must be on staff and the point people for the client.

- Drugs to aid in recovery must be administered by medical/psychiatric professionals only.

- Trained, professional counselors with a graduate school degree in the addiction field must be available 24/7.

- The 12- step approach of having recovering addicts with no other qualifications act as counselors/advisors to new residents must be prohibited. It is like the blind leading the blind!

- Mandatory government oversight.

Newspapers and television news often report stories of someone going to a hospital for an injury or illness only to become worse by contracting an infectious disease from the many potential sources in a hospital. This horrific set of circumstances is what adults and youth of America are now being subjected to. People who are beginning on a path to recovery, are taking the next "prescribed" step. There, they and their loved one are expecting treatment which they hope and pray will ultimately lead to a peaceful and addiction free life. Except what they get is

one of those "infectious diseases" from unsupervised interaction with other addicts, untrained counselors with lack of experience and expertise in addiction and the absence of medical, psychiatric and treatment professionals they can go to when they are experiencing the symptoms from their addiction. Either the person, when they leave the facility, is worse off than they come in or their addiction is the same and they quickly resort to self-medicating. In many cases and in particular in the sober houses, people are getting high and overdosing in them. We must fix this sober house and treatment center crisis and we must do it now! We must treat addiction no differently than any other medical illness. Sadly, addiction treatment is not performed as well and research for it is not funded nearly as much as other life-threatening diseases.

The youth of America are our most precious resource. We must not allow their future to be defined by addiction and ruined by ineffective and dangerous treatment facilities.

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