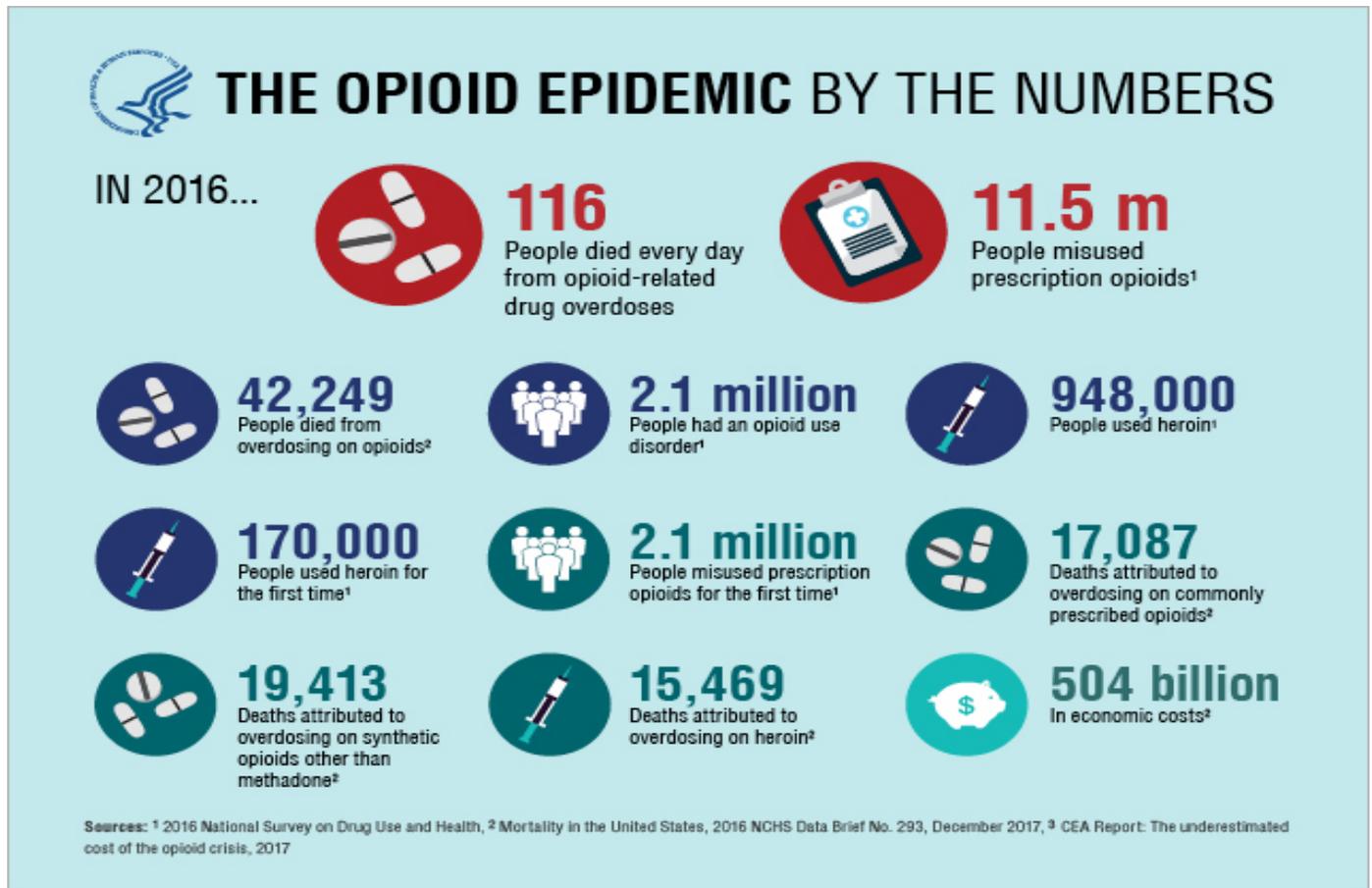


The Impact of the Opioid Epidemic on Middle-Aged and Older Adults

By Dr. Nancy Orel*

The United States is currently experiencing one of the most significant public health crises of all time - the opioid epidemic. The opioid epidemic has impacted families, communities, and the economy, with Ohio being hit particularly hard. We all know a friend, family member, or loved one devastated by opioids. The chart below clearly illustrates the impact of the opioid epidemic (using statistics from the year 2016):



These numbers from 2016 are staggering and it is estimated that approximately 350,000 Americans have died from an overdose involving prescription or illicit opioids within the past 16 years. While opioid overdose deaths are more common in younger populations, prevalence among middle-aged and older adults is growing. In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that opioid overdose death rates increased the greatest in adults aged 55-64 and adults between the ages of 45-54 had the highest death rate from opioid drug overdose. Currently, forty-two percent of all opioid overdose deaths in the U.S. are people aged 45 and older. Within the ten counties of Northwest Ohio (Defiance, Erie, Fulton, Henry, Lucas, Ottawa, Paulding, Sandusky, Williams, and Wood), forty-six percent of the opioid overdose deaths are people aged 45 and older.

The toll of the opioid epidemic has hit all age groups, especially those aged 50 and older who are the greatest consumers of prescription opioids. Due to their increased rates of chronic pain, older adults are three times more

likely to be prescribed opioids. More alarming is that the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) reported that 2.7 million Americans over age 50 were taking opioids for reasons contrary to or in amounts beyond what was prescribed. Between 2002 and 2016, prescription opioid misuse increased 66% for those aged 50 – 64 and more than doubled for those aged 65 and older. The non-medical use of opioids among older adults has been associated with hip fractures, traffic accidents, confusion, cardiac events, and falls and the hospitalization rate for the misuse of opioids has quintupled in the past 20 years for those aged 65 and older. The Ohio Department of Aging recently reported that individuals on Medicare have one of the highest and fastest-growing rates of diagnosed opioid use disorder.

The toll of the opioid epidemic on middle-aged and older adults has not received adequate national attention. Unfortunately, the stigma and shame related to prescription drug misuse or abuse prevents many individuals from seeking treatment and/or taking preventative measures. It is imperative that everyone becomes knowledgeable about opioid use, misuse, and abuse. Likewise, it is imperative that in the midst of the opioid epidemic that viable alternatives for managing persistent pain are available, assessable, and affordable.

The Optimal Aging Institute (OAI), in collaboration with the Wood County Committee on Aging (WCCOA) and the Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio (AOoA) are addressing the devastating human, social, and economic impact of opioid use and misuse, and subsequently opioid overdoses and deaths among middle-aged and older adults. Two workshops highlighting the impact of the opioid epidemic on middle-aged and older adults have already taken place, with a third scheduled for December 3, 2018. The initial workshop took place on July 18th from noon until 5:00pm and the second took place on October 5th from 8:00am until 1:00pm. Both of these events took place at the Penta Career Center in Perrysburg Ohio. Key leaders from Northwest Ohio discussed the impact of the opioid crisis on middle-aged and older adults. Special speakers for the October workshop were Lance Robertson (Assistant Secretary of Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and a panel of health care professionals. Information on opioid use, misuse, abuse, and dependency was provided along with information on alternative strategies for pain management and community resources from agencies/organizations in Northwest Ohio. Because many individuals aged 50 and older are assuming primary caregiving of their grandchildren because of the opioid epidemic, the workshops also addressed the range of unique social, financial, physical, and mental health challenges of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren when parents are unable to provide this care.

Visit the Optimal Aging Institute website at www.bgsu.edu/oai for more information on how the opioid crisis is impacting older adults. Included on this website is a video that highlights the workshops.

*Dr. Nancy Orel is the Interim Chair of the Department of Human Services and the Executive Director of Research for the Optimal Aging Institute (OAI) at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). The OAI was strategically developed in 2016 with a five-year commitment of financial support from Medical Mutual of Ohio. The primary purpose of the OAI is to mobilize university and community resources to support and expand programs, services, and research focusing on optimal aging (e.g., the ability to live at the highest potential that is possible). A key example of the OAI's ability to mobilize community resources to expand research and services for older adults is the 20 year Joint-Use-Agreement (JUA) with the Wood County Committee on Aging (WCCOA). Through this JUA, the OAI and the WCCOA have initiated a wealth of ongoing educational and research activities that involve BGSU faculty/students working with WCCOA staff/participants. A current collaborative educational/research endeavor is the development of workshops addressing the impact of the opioid crisis on older adults and the identification of services needed for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren because of the opioid crisis.