

The Columbus Dispatch

Letter to the Editor: Approach could help teens who face addiction

Written by: Kathleen Gmeiner, December 3, 2015

Thanks to Dispatch reporters Cathy Candisky and Alan Johnson for shining a light on the valiant efforts of families in central Ohio to address the crisis of teen and young adult addiction (“Families take lead to fight epidemic,” Dispatch article, Sunday).

It clearly will take a community effort to address this problem, and it also will take strong leadership at all levels of government. But we desperately need a way to learn directly from a teen if he or she is starting to experiment with drugs and get that young person help before it's too late.

There is a way to sensitively approach young people; it's called SBIRT — Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment. It can be applied in the hospital emergency department, by pediatricians at an annual physical and, most important, it can be done in schools. The procedure has the support of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

A trained individual, such as a school nurse, asks a student a few questions about alcohol and drug use, perhaps as part of other health screenings. For students who say they have been misusing a substance, a trained person follows up with the youngster to discuss the harmful effects of drug use, assess the student's readiness to change and help the student devise ways to do so.

Where necessary, a referral to treatment is made.

The schools that are doing it are finding ways to protect a student's privacy, to involve their parents as needed, and to avoid labeling or stigmatizing, all of which are critical to a successful program.

The Trust for America's Health examined the explosion of teen-overdose deaths in a report issued last month. Over the past decade, the number of overdose deaths quadrupled. The report recommends incorporating the screening technique in middle and high schools and health-care settings.

College-age students in recovery tell us they wished someone had asked them in middle or high school if they were using. That's why Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio is calling its campaign to spread use of the screening technique “Somebody Finally Asked Me!” We call on leaders at the state and local level and the community groups that are addressing this crisis to take a look at this method and ask their school district and state leadership to make it more broadly available to young people.