



The “Perfect Storm”: Drug Abuse Converges in the Heartland

In the summer of 2001, researchers from the Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring (OSAM) Network initiated a “Rapid Response” investigation into growing heroin use in Ohio’s cities. The investigators identified an alarming trend—a connection between prescription opioid abuse, subsequent heroin use, and the adoption of high-risk behaviors, particularly among 18- to 25-year-old white males, many from middle and upper income families.

The following summer, a drug abuse treatment agency in a small town on the river in southeast Ohio reported 52 non-fatal drug overdoses

over a four-month period, most involving heroin or prescription opioids such as OxyContin®, Fentanyl®, and Vicodin®. The state asked OSAM researchers from the School of Medicine’s Center for Interventions, Treatment and Addictions Research (CITAR) to conduct another rapid epidemiological study in the rural county. The scientists concluded that the situation in that small community mirrored what was happening across America—the mushrooming supply of relatively inexpensive, high purity, heroin had spread from U.S. coastal cities to the heartland.

“Such a tremendous increase in heroin and opioid abuse in a small midwestern town is unprecedented. It can have a devastating impact on abusers, their families, and the community,” says Harvey Siegal, Ph.D., professor of community health, CITAR director, and principal investigator for OSAM. In a March 1, 2003, letter to the *American Family Physician*, he and



Harvey Siegal, Ph.D.

his colleagues wrote that new heroin abusers “reported that heroin was more readily available and less expensive than OxyContin and that they would never have tried heroin had they not become addicted to OxyContin.”

“If something’s not done about prescription drug diversion and abuse



Robert Carlson, Ph.D.

and heroin, we’re going to see terrible things happening with young people,” says Robert Carlson, Ph.D., professor of community health and OSAM program administrator. “We

initially identified OxyContin abuse in a few urban areas, and then it began showing up in rural areas. We are witnessing the predatory expansion of the heroin trade from urban to rural settings by some very savvy underground business professionals.”

“It’s like the movie ‘The Perfect Storm,’” Dr. Siegal says. “We’re seeing a convergence of things—a generation of young people willing to experiment with drugs, the arrival of new, powerful, prescription drugs on the scene, easy access to heroin, and a compromised public health system. It all converges in a naive population, leading to more addicted people, lives cut short through overdose and disease, and ongoing problems for our communities.”

CITAR initiated OSAM in 1999 in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services (ODADAS), which funds the project. The OSAM Network combines a core group of scientists from Wright State and the University of Akron with regional epidemiologists throughout the state. The regional epidemiologists use qualitative data from focus groups

and individual interviews with active and recovering drug abusers and “front-line” drug treatment and law enforcement professionals as well as statistical data from such sources as coroners, law enforcement agencies, crime labs, and treatment programs, to issue comprehensive biannual reports for the state. Critical findings are rapidly disseminated through “OSAM-O-Grams,” one-page reports sent statewide via fax, e-mail, or U.S. mail that report emerging substance abuse trends.

“What we’re doing with OSAM is unique,” Dr. Carlson says. OSAM researchers were the first to be able to identify emerging drug abuse trends in Ohio such as the movement of drugs like Ecstasy from raves and clubs to small social gatherings and uptake of these drugs by different populations.

An internationally recognized hub of substance abuse knowledge, research, and experience, CITAR has been studying the problem for almost 25 years. OSAM is just one of several CITAR projects that employ qualitative or ethnographic research methods. Other studies look at crack-

cocaine abuse in cities, stimulant abuse in rural populations, Ecstasy and other club drug use, and the high-risk behaviors of injection drug users. Some CITAR projects rely more on collecting and analyzing quantitative data—like the Dayton Area Drug Survey (DADS) of middle and high school students. Others focus on investigating treatment strategies—like the Weekend Intervention Program (WIP) for people convicted of driving under the influence and the new Reclaiming Futures initiative to

address teen substance abuse and delinquency in the community.

Both qualitative and quantitative research are necessary to understanding a complex problem like substance abuse, Dr. Siegal says. “Something like DADS gives you a very broad, but relatively shallow, moving picture of what’s happening. Those people who are most in trouble are less likely to be picked up by the DADS survey, because they will have dropped out of school. Projects like OSAM, on the other hand, give you a more narrow, but in-depth picture of either an actual or potential problem. So you have to do both kinds of research at all times.”

Dr. Siegal concludes, “The approach that has been used by our nation to deal with drug problems is misinformed, lopsided, and just flat-out dumb. Substance abuse is a public health problem and public health approaches are considerably more effective than other approaches. We have a good knowledge about what works, not with absolute certainty of course, but we have definite ideas about best practices. With WIP for example, we have

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demonstrated over the past 23 years that rather than simply lock somebody up, if you can identify drug or drinking problems and provide effective rehabilitation, these people are at less risk and so is the community.

“Can we do it better? Absolutely. That’s where research comes in. Our job as researchers is to point to problems before they are right in our face, and as importantly, to find ways to better address current and emerging problems.”

—Robin Suits