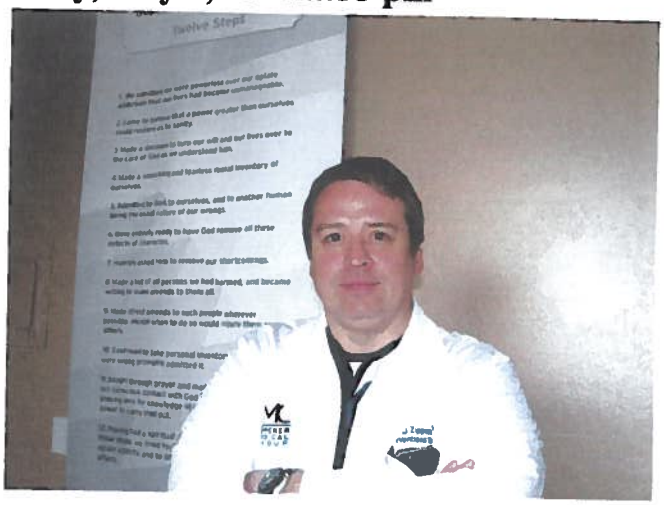
Valley heroin use 'epidemic'

By Christina Seine For the Frontiersman | Posted: Tuesday, July 1, 2014 1:35 pm

MAT-SU — Janet, a pretty, brown-eyed 20-something-year-old, sits at a conference table at a medical clinic in Wasilla and fidgets while the doctor goes over her chart. She's pregnant, although not yet far enough along to show much. Her hand goes to her belly; awkwardly she moves it away.

"How are you doing?" the doctor asked. Her eyes met his for a millisecond. "I feel, um … I feel better," she said.



Dr. John Zipperer

Dr. John Zipperer, who runs an addiction center in Wasilla, says heroin use is widespread in the Valley, calling it 'epidemic.'

It's been about three weeks since Janet last used heroin, and two weeks since she started seeing Dr. John Zipperer, who runs an addiction center in Wasilla.

Janet — not her real name, of course — doesn't fit the stereotype of what heroin addiction looks like. Her skin is a deep-summer tan, not pale. There are no dark circles under her eyes. She's slim and healthy-looking, not emaciated.

Except for a certain jittery wariness, she could be anyone — the barista who remembers to put extra whipped cream on your caramel mocha, the shy girl in your macroeconomics class, the receptionist at your kids' dentist office. Any of them could be on heroin and you might not even know it, Zipperer said.

"Very often, you can't tell by looking at people," he said. "Often, addicts manage to work a job, have a family. You'd be surprised."

The drug is so widespread in the Mat-Su now that Zipperer called it an "epidemic."

"It's rampant in the Valley. It's unbelievable," he said.

Law enforcement officials wholeheartedly agree. According to the Alaska State Troopers annual drug report, troopers seized 55 pounds of heroin and made 151 heroin-related arrests in 2013. That's up from about 6 pounds seized and 118 heroin-related arrests in 2011.

"The resurgence of the abuse of heroin and continued abuse of other opiates, including various

opioid-based prescription medications, is of significant concern," the report states.

Wasilla Police Chief Gene Belden underscored troopers' findings.

"We've seen quite an increase in heroin use in the last year or so," he said. "It's an easy drug to get a hold of — it's easily transported, it's easily hidden."

Belden said his department is working toward increasing training that will help local law enforcement stop the drug dealers.

"We've been catching the users," he said. "We need to go after the sellers."

However, sellers can be hard to find. And they're persistent, working hard to keep their customers hooked, Janet said. A close friend of hers died recently of a suspected overdose, and she has other friends who use it as well — whether they can afford it or not.

"One of my best friends started, um … putting herself out there, to two or three different dealers … to pay for it," she said.

Heroin is an opiate that occurs naturally in the resin of poppy plants and is synthesized from morphine. It's used recreationally for the extreme relaxation and euphoria it induces when injected, sniffed or smoked. It's known on the street as H, smack, horse, brown, black and tar, and troopers say it's becoming more prevalent outside urban areas, crossing socio-economic boundaries.

Lately, Mat-Su residents have encountered evidence of the Valley's growing drug problem on lawns, playgrounds and parks. A recent Facebook post warned residents to use a bag to catch lawnmower clippings after a businessperson discovered used needles in the weeds and grass. A walk through a Valley park turned up several tiny pieces of burnt tinfoil.

"Yeah, that's a 'nifty,'" Janet explained. "Those little squares of foil … about a tenth of a gram (of heroin). They usually go for $50. A lot of people won't want to do less than $50."

A person with a serious addiction might go through four or five a day, she added.

That means an addict can require several hundreds of dollars a day to fund their habit.

"Some people trade their food stamps," Janet said. "Some people steal a lot. Some people have a job, and all of that money goes toward their drug habit."

The number of illicit drug users ages 12 and older in Alaska has remained about 30 percent above the national average, according to Alaska Department of Heath & Social Services documents. In 2008, Alaska ranked sixth in the country for illicit drug use.

Janet was introduced to the drug at the age of 18 by a boyfriend, the father of her first child (now a toddler and seemingly healthy, although Janet used heroin during that pregnancy as well). She's been to treatment centers — one for six months, once for a little more than 30 days. She's been

incarcerated. She's been homeless. It didn't stop her.

Her story is not unusual, Zipperer said.

"Some people — not everyone, of course — but some people are predisposed to addiction. Most people, maybe 89 percent or 90 percent of the population, can have that one glass of wine or a Percocet after a dental surgery, and they don't have a problem," he said. "But for people who are genetically predisposed to it, heroin is an incredibly powerful addiction. It's evil. It's like you belong to Satan now. It just possesses you."

The drug has about a 95 percent relapse rate for patients who try to quit "cold turkey," he added.

"So, out of every 100 people who go off the drug completely, who try their best, who really believe they're never going to use it again, maybe five will be successful."

Zipperer didn't originally intend to work in drug rehabilitation, he said. However, when working at a local hospital, he began noticing a number of patients suffering side-effects of heroin use.

"At one point, there were five different women with heart valve infections," he said. "That's one of the complications you see when people are injecting heroin."

He was already doing research on addiction when his own father, who had been on prescription pain medication for years, died of an overdose.

"I have to be honest … I was ashamed at first … I didn't want to tell anybody," he said.

But that pain also was a catalyst, he said. He wanted to help people.

He recalled an earlier patient who struggled with addition.

"She was 21 years old, and the Hell's Angels just owned her," he said. "I tried to help her …" he broke off mid-sentence and reflected for a moment. "You know, those who want to criticize (people addicted to heroin) … what if it was your granddaughter? What if that was someone you loved? Why wouldn't we do everything we could to help them?"

In addition to the clinic, Zipperer runs Buprenorphine Anonymous, a free 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous or NarcAnon. Buprenorphine is a medication used to treat heroin addiction. It's also used to control pain.

Zipperer said patients using Buprenorphine (also known as Suboxone) do not get "high." Instead, he said, it allows them to function normally and cope without heroin in their system.

"When they're stable on it, you can't even tell they're on it," he said.

"With an addict, when they don't have heroin, it's like their brain is screaming at them — all the time. With buprenorphine, with suboxone (and sometimes methadone), it quiets that. We see people

on this treatment doing really well, people that have tried many times before to quit on their own and failed."

In Janet's case, it seems to be working.

"It's the one thing that's helped me so far," she said.

For more information on Buprenorphine Anonymous, call 376-5228.