



COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



Building Broader Communities to Fight Addiction

A heartbreaking epidemic is going on in Putnam County—heroin overdose deaths have more than doubled in Putnam County during recent years. Thirty-three fatalities occurred in the two-year period of 2012 and 2013—that is up from 15 in 2010 and 2011. These grim statistics have made a tragic mark on families, friends and our community. This scourge is one of the most pressing and complex public health problems we have in Putnam.

Putnam County certainly does not face this drug crisis alone. Drug overdose is a significant issue in the state and in fact the country. This prompted the NYS Department of Health to enact laws that allow nonmedical personnel to administer a prescription medicine to prevent a fatality in someone who has overdosed.

The Putnam County Department of Health recently launched an “opioid overdose prevention program,” joining dozens of other counties in the state adopting this public health intervention. The drug called naloxone has been successfully prescribed and distributed to not only law enforcement, but also directly to heroin users, their families and friends in 15 states and Washington DC. In Putnam, lives have already been saved with timely use of this drug.

Nonetheless, this is not the solution to our problem, only a stopgap that will save some lives while we address the root causes of the problem. The answer is complex and requires a multi-faceted, multi-sector approach and sustained effort.

Most of our current opioid problem in Putnam County started in our own medicine cabinets. Overprescribing by physicians and ready access in the home are at the source of the current problem. Equally important, but less clear, is the role of poor mental health in opioid abuse. This not only has led to unintended overdose and death, but suicides in our county as well.

Mental health promotion is particularly central for me. Many years ago I knew two teenagers, children of my friends, who made suicide attempts. There were drug abuse issues present. Thankfully they survived and eventually flourished, making me a firm believer in the power of mental health support. I have worked hard to reach out and support mental health assistance in our county and was particularly gratified by the Mental Health Association of Putnam County’s honoring me at their annual gala last fall.

Our County Executive declared a “War on Addiction” and has been supportive in the numerous efforts we have undertaken. We educate physicians on the dangers of overprescribing; we have medication “take-back” days; we cooperate with tracking over prescribing; we work closely with community and other governmental agencies in our community, and as already mentioned we initiated an opioid overdose program with naloxone.

There is much that still needs to be done. We continue to try. One thing is for sure—every effort counts. I’ve been guided throughout my professional life by the exhortation of the ancient sage Hillel who said that to save one life is to save the world.