

Government policy plays key role, health official says

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BRIDGEWATER — Education is important to understanding what drugs can do to you, but it has no impact on a young person's decision to abuse drugs, says the head of addictions services for South Shore Health.

"Public policy is the only thing that will affect change," said Todd Leader.

It's still important for parents and teachers to tell young people about the dangers of drugs, but it won't affect whether they try them.

He said international research has shown public policy has the greatest effect on people's behaviour.

For example, bombarding people with images of cancerous tumours and lungs, and having smokers with cancer speak to kids did nothing to prevent or stop them from smoking.

Leader said that only happened when the government increased cigarette taxes, removed cigarettes from vending machines, stopped selling cigarettes in pharmacies and increased penalties to those selling tobacco to minors.

The results were dramatic. Leader said the number of smokers dropped 10 per cent, to 20 per cent. "One hundred thousand less people smoke now and that decline started with public policy work."

And while prescription drug abuse is a problem in the Bridgewater area, Leader said that isn't the full picture.

"When we see these tragedies, . . . in most cases alcohol is involved, but we overlook that. Our eyes go to words like pills and opiates and prescription drug problem."

Alcohol is the drug of choice for more than 80 per cent of those seeking help with addictions through South Shore Health, he said.

Opioids, including heroine and prescription drugs, account for 14 per cent of clients.

He said health-care professionals and society need to recognize all components of the problem if they hope to do something about it.

"Alcohol is a piece, and when it's combined with prescription drugs, that is lethal. . . . We cannot take alcohol out of the discussion because absolutely it is the foundation in many cases."

South Shore Health has offered addictions services both in hospital and on an outpatient basis for more than 20 years. And every week two counsellors visit every middle and senior high school in the district. Leader said the health authority is working with the school board to expand that service by this fall.

And South Shore Health is working with Annapolis Valley Health to access its recently announced methadone maintenance program.

Leader said it's clear what politicians and health-care leaders must do: "Wherever there are opportunities to develop public policy decrease access to substances that are harming our kids, let's have that conversation."

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