

New Generation of Doctors Seek Advanced Training in Addiction Medicine

March 29, 2019

March 29, 2019 - PRESSADVANTAGE -

The US surgeon general's office estimates that more than 20 million people have a substance use disorder. At the same time, the US drug overdose crisis is showing no signs of slowing. Year after year, the opioid epidemic is killing thousands of people. What's even more concerning is the fact that addiction can begin from simply taking prescription medications the wrong way.

Right now there aren't nearly enough physicians who specialize in treating addiction. The opioid epidemic has made this doctor deficit painfully apparent. The country is in need of doctors with extensive clinical training in addiction medicine. Click the link to see Manhattan's top rehab placement programs.

This issue is spurring medical institutions across the United States to create fellowships for aspiring doctors who want to treat substance use disorders with the same precision and science as other diseases.

There are now more than 60 of these fellowship programs that are offering physicians a year or two of postgraduate training in clinics and hospitals where they learn evidence-based approaches for addiction treatment.

These programs are drawing a new generation of talented doctors who want to provide the care that addicted individuals need. Dr. Hillary Tamar is a part of this new generation who are committed to treating addiction.

Tamar, who is now in the second year of a family medicine residency in Phoenix, wasn't initially thinking about addiction medicine when she started medical school in Chicago. "As a medical student, honestly, you do your ER rotation, people label a patient as 'pain-seeking' and it's bad," she said. "And that's all you do about it."

However, when she entered her fourth year of med school, she was assigned to a rotation at a rehab facility in southern Arizona. "I was able to connect with people in a way that I haven't been able to connect with them in another specialty."

Working with the patients there transformed her understanding of addiction. The experience showed her the potential for doctors to change lives. "They can go from spending all their time pursuing the acquisition of a substance to being brothers, sisters, daughters [and] fathers making breakfast for their kids again," Tamar said. "It's really powerful."

When Tamar finishes her residency, she's planning to pursue a fellowship in addiction medicine. She sees addiction medicine, like primary care, as a way to build lasting relationships with patients "and a way to focus on more than a single diagnosis. "I love when I see addiction patients on my schedule, even if they're pregnant and on meth," she says. "More room to do good?it's exciting."

Dr. Anna Lembke, medical director of addiction medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine believes that doctors with Tamar's enthusiasm are sorely needed. "Even 10 years ago, I couldn't find a medical student or resident interested in learning about addiction medicine if I looked under a rock. They were just not out there," Lembke said.

But she is also seeing a change in the upcoming generation of doctors who are drawn to the field because they care about social justice. "I now have medical students and residents knocking on my door, emailing me. They all want to learn more about addiction."

"We have got an enormous gap between the need and the doctors available to provide that treatment," Lembke said. "At least the medical community has begun to wake up to consider not only their role in triggering this opioid epidemic but also the ways they need to step up to solve the problem."

Dr. Luke Peterson finished his residency in family medicine in Phoenix in 2016. Back then there were no addiction medicine fellowships in Arizona. This is why he moved to Seattle to complete a yearlong fellowship at Swedish Cherry Hill Family Medicine Residency. There he learned how to treat people who are in recovery from drug use.

"I really needed to do a fellowship if I was going to make an impact and be able to teach others to make the same impact," said Peterson, who went on to help start an addiction medicine fellowship program in Arizona. The program is based in Phoenix at the University of Arizona's medical school. "As we provide more education and more support to primary care physicians, they will feel more comfortable screening and treating for addiction," he adds.

This is a trend that addiction specialists are hoping will continue, especially since the opioid crisis is still affecting the nation.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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