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Stark jail, SRCCC offering Vivitrol for heroin treatment

The county jail and Stark Regional Community Correction Center are making Vivitrol shots available.

CANTON Richard T. Smail was looking forward to what could be the most dangerous time in his life.

In a week, he would be released from the Stark Regional Community Correction Center after serving four months for heroin possession.

Heroin addicts are at high risk for a fatal overdose when they leave prison, jail or a treatment facility, according to studies. Abstinence leaves their bodies more sensitive to opiates, and if they relapse, the heroin they use could be more potent than what they used in the past.

To help Smail stay sober a nurse injected him last week with Vivitrol, a drug that blocks heroin's euphoric high. The 33-year-old Alliance man is just the second SRCCC client to get a shot of Vivitrol before being released.

With Vivitrol, Smail doesn't crave heroin, and he knows there's no point in using the drug; in fact, he could die if he does, he said.

"The way I see it, it's a modern medicine to regain control of your life," Smail said.

Blocking the high

SRCCC and the Stark County Jail have worked with CommQuest Services and Stark Mental Health & Addiction Recovery to make Vivitrol shots available in the two lock-up facilities.

CommQuest screens potential Vivitrol recipients, gives the shots and does follow-up counseling and treatment; Stark MHAR — the county mental-health board — provides funding.

Vivitrol is an injectable extended-release form of the medication naltrexone. The drug has been available locally through CommQuest's Regional Center for Opiate Recovery since last year.

Vivitrol was first used to treat alcohol dependence, and the Food and Drug Administration approved the drug for treating opiate addiction in 2010. During a six-month study, 36 percent of patients on Vivitrol stayed in treatment and stayed clean, compared to 23 percent of patients who took a placebo, according to FDA.

Unlike two other medications used to treat opiate addiction — methadone and Suboxone — Vivitrol doesn't swap one opiate for another. And patients on Vivitrol need just one dose a month.

"Methadone, Suboxone and Vivitrol all have their place in the treatment community," said Wendy Hunter, CommQuest's clinical director of outpatient services. "It just depends on what that person needs at that time."

Vivitrol comes with serious risks. Using heroin while on Vivitrol can lead to a fatal overdose, and patients on the medicine might not realize their increased sensitivity to opiates.

Other serious potential side effects include liver damage, suicide, pneumonia and allergic reactions. For those reasons, Vivitrol patients are medically screened and advised of the risks before getting shots.

Vivitrol costs about \$1,000 a shot. CommQuest gives one shot to a patient before they leave SRCCC or the jail. Medicaid, private insurance or Stark MHAR dollars pay for subsequent shots.

The county mental-health board allocated \$60,000 to make Vivitrol available at the jail and SRCCC in the annual budget that ends this month, and will continue funding the program next year.

CommQuest wants patients to stay in its Vivitrol program for at least six months, which includes counseling, random drug tests and 12-step meetings.

"The injection is not the cure," Hunter said. "It's just a part of the recovery process."

Increased need

SRCCC is a treatment facility for felons from Stark, Tuscarawas, Holmes and Wayne counties. About 425 clients pass through the center in a year.

The new Vivitrol program is open to clients who are residents of Stark County and were sentenced by the county's judges. Tuscarawas County has its own medically assisted treatment program for opiate addicts.



Richard T. Smail, 33, of Alliance, is the second client from the Stark Regional Community Correction Center to get a Vivitrol shot. The medication blocks the euphoric high of heroin and other opiates. (CantonRep.com / Bob Rossiter)

Craig Prysock, director of SRCCC, said opiate addiction has been on the rise among the center's clients.

In 2007, only 10 percent of SRCCC's client population — 30 people that year — had even tried an opiate, Prysock said. Now, opiates, primarily heroin, are the drug of choice for 30 percent of SRCCC's clients, some 125 people.

"Almost 50 percent of my female population is using heroin," Prysock said, and opiates are the second-most-used drug among men in the facility.

The jail also has seen an increase in the number of opiate-addicted inmates, so much so that it revised its alcohol and drug treatment program. That includes making Vivitrol injections available to eligible inmates.

"You have to have somebody who realizes and accepts the fact that they have an addiction issue and is willing to participate and hopefully work their way through the program successfully," said Sheriff George T. Maier said.

Vivitrol is neither a wonder drug, nor a panacea, Prysock cautioned. It's more like a life-vest, a safety aid to guard against relapse.

Recovery still depends on proper use of the medication, supportive treatment and the determination of the individual.

"The further you get from that last day of use, the greater your chances for success," Prysock said.

Making it

This is the second time Smail has been on Vivitrol. He got shots through CommQuest from September to January — roughly the time between when Alliance police caught him with a syringe loaded with heroin and his admission to SRCCC.

Smail said he used heroin for about a year, driving twice a day from Alliance to Canton to buy the drug. He mowed lawns between trips to get money.

Vivitrol helped Smail stay sober until he could get into SRCCC, where he went through four months of counseling, and he wanted to continue with the medication after his release, he said.

Smail was aware of the risks and challenges ahead, but "using's a far worse risk than doing the treatment," he said.

He talked enthusiastically and peppered his speech with the language of 12-step programs. He carried a handful of sobriety coins in his pocket, tokens of his ability to stay clean.

Over the last few weeks, Smail had eased back into society with weekend furloughs. He had a job, and eventually wanted to get back to umpiring baseball, he said. "I really want to make it out there."

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