

7. Most prescription medication that is abused is obtained directly from doctors through “doctor shopping”

According to a report published by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 2012, 55% of all pain relievers that are obtained by those who have died are obtained for free through others. Many addicts are given the medication or steal it from people they know.

Many people inadvertently contribute to the overdose issue by leaving their prescription medication in the medicine cabinets or in drawers in their house, sometimes for many years after the drug was prescribed. Guests who visit, many of whom would never be suspected of abusing drugs, steal it.

If you have prescription drugs in your house, do not dispose of it by flushing it in the sewage system. It will contaminate the water system. Turn it in for safe disposal. You can find the nearest collection site by visiting www.dea.gov or call (800)882-9593.

8. The overdose death issue is mostly a Western Pennsylvania issue and maybe just a Westmoreland County issue. I don't read about this number of deaths happening in other places.

The issue of prescription drug

overdoses is a regional and national crisis. Certainly is it bad in the entire state. Our state is tied for 11th worst state in the country in pain reliever overdose deaths, according to a 2012 CDC report.

The four state region of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky are all in the top 11, making this the worst region in the country. No other states have more than two contiguous states in the top 12 states for overdose deaths. West Virginia is the second worst state in the country, behind only New Mexico. That makes this region the worst in the country.

9. If you take away the demand for drugs with better education and stronger consequences, the problem will decrease.

Certainly education and consequences are important. The Penn State EPI Center reports a Return On Investment (ROI) of prevention programs of \$5 to \$25 for every \$1 invested in evidence based prevention programs. But education and stronger consequences are not the “magic pill,” (no pun intended) to deal with this problem. There is no magic pill.

Thinking of this in supply and demand terms, simply dealing with the problem on the demand side of the

equation is being naïve about what is happening on the supply side, as well as not recognizing that the tougher drug laws enacted in the past 20 years have been relatively ineffective to solve this problem. Our jails are now full of inmates with drug problems. The problem is getting worse.

Speaking to the supply side of the equation, there was 4 times more prescription pain relievers delivered to doctor's offices and hospitals from 1999 to 2010 in the United States, according to the CDC. Prescription medication is readily available through many different avenues than 14 years ago. Part of the solution is to deal with the supply part of the equation.

10. This drug problem is a _____ problem. (Fill in the blank with your choice of: crime, public health, moral, spiritual, legislative, family breakdown, or other problem of your choice.)

This is not a one dimensional problem. Subsequently, a one dimensional solution is not likely to work. It will take effective change in many areas to have an impact.

Top 10 Myths About the Westmoreland County Drug Epidemic



Information provided by:
Westmoreland County 2011 and 2012
Coroner's Reports
www.co.westmoreland.pa.us
and
2012 Center for Disease
Control report
[http://www.cdc.gov/
homeandrecreationalafety/rxbrief](http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/rxbrief)

1. Our young people are dying in droves in the drug epidemic.

It is mostly people over 41 years of age who have died in the past two years in Westmoreland County. 40 of 64 people (63%) in 2011 and 47 of 78 people (60%) in 2012 who died were over the age of 41. The number of people over 31 years of age in the same years was 50 (78%) and 62 (79%), respectively for 2011 and 2012. Two people died in both 2011 and 2012 who were 20 years of age or younger.

2. Heroin is causing most of the deaths.

Though heroin use is certainly on the increase because it is cheap and available, it is not causing most of the deaths. Other substances are causing a majority of the deaths, mostly prescription drugs. In 2011, 9 of 64 persons who overdosed had heroin in their system. In 2012, that number tripled to 27. The percentage of victims with heroin in the system increased from 14% to 35%, indicating a drastic increase in the rate among victims. However, the mixture of other substances, mostly prescription medication, was what was killing the remainder of the victims. It should be noted that some of these medications are synthetic

3. The overdose death problem has been an issue for only a couple of years.

The number of deaths has climbed steadily since 2002, with the exception of slight dips during 2007 and 2008 in this 10 year upward trend of deaths. In 2002, there were 22 overdose deaths. That number has increased 355% in Westmoreland County to 78 in 2012.

The overdoses have been the leading cause of death among accidents and suicides in Westmoreland County in 7 of the last 8 years. There have been record overdose death numbers for four years in a row. As of March 31, 2013, if the current pace keeps up, we will have over 120 deaths this year.

Those numbers don't take into account all of the cases of overdoses where the victim survived. Excelsior Health Emergency Rooms reported treating nearly 400 near fatal overdoses in 2012. There were likely more near fatal overdose cases of county residents than this treated by other health care providers. Near fatal overdose cases far exceed the deaths each year of this epidemic.

4. The problem is predominantly in "bad" neighborhoods or the "worst" towns.

The worst concentration of deaths in 2011 shows a strong trend in the Rt. 30 corridor, specifically, the regions within the townships of Hempfield (includes Greensburg, New Stanton, & Jeannette), Unity (includes Latrobe), and Ligonier (includes Ligonier Borough). In 2012, they shifted slightly to Derry (includes Derry and New Alexander) and Hempfield (includes Greensburg, New Stanton, and Jeannette).

The truth is the problem is spread throughout the county. This epidemic knows no cultural, geographic, or economic boundaries.

5. I don't know anyone personally who has died or Oded. The problem doesn't affect me.

If you are lucky enough not to be affected personally by not knowing anyone who has died or overdosed, the problem is hitting you in the pocketbook. One of our county judges, Judge Alfred Bell, hears dozens of cases a week on retail theft, many that take place at large retail stores. He believes that 90% of the cases are related to drugs.

Addicts go to the stores to steal items for resale in order to feed their habit. Judge Bell often orders a substance abuse assessment for retail theft cases if the accused has been using drugs. This amount of retail thefts drives the price of goods up for everybody.

If you are an employer, you need to be concerned. Current employers who do drug testing regularly complain that a significant amount of applicants for jobs fail the initial drug test. They say positive drug tests make it difficult to find qualified people to hire.

6. These addicts choose their fate. They deserve what they get.

Many people begin their addiction by being prescribed pain relievers as a result of a car accident, health issue, or an injury. In their recovery, they become addicted and have a difficult time stopping their use. When their prescription runs out, they turn to other ways to satisfy their addiction by taking it from people they know, buying prescription medication illegally from others, "doctor shop" for additional medication, or turn to street drugs such as heroin.

No one's ambition is to be a drug addict.