Addiction Alert

This article is written out of disappointing experiences with patients in recovery from their addiction who suffer relapse into drug dependency precipitated by analgesics prescribed by a physician, surgeon, or dentist.

Scientific evidence is increasing to show that persons with addiction, at least the great majority, have an underlying neurobiological basis for this disease. Often this problem is due to a genetic variation whereby alcohol and other drugs are metabolized differently. This metabolic difference is predisposing for an individual so affected to become addicted. This metabolic difference causes the patient after one exposure to certain agents to crave repeated dosing. This phenomenon may lead to loss of control of such drug usage and to progress quickly into addictive behavior.

At The Healing Place of Wake County, a residential recovery facility for homeless persons with addiction, clients spend 9 to 14 months in which they stop using alcohol and other drugs; learn how to live with sobriety; and re-establish themselves as sober, self-supporting members of the community. They work diligently with strong peer support to establish a lifestyle of recovery with total avoidance of alcohol and other drugs. They become actively affiliated with the recovery network in this community. They are taught in detail about their disease of addiction including the fact that they need to avoid even one alcoholic beverage or dose of narcotic. Their metabolic variable makes it advisable for them to avoid both such agents. They are repeatedly instructed on this precaution.

Even so, with a subsequent scenario whereby these persons suffer pain after injury, surgery, or a dental procedure; they may be prescribed an analgesic. If such analgesic is in the narcotic family, these patients may experience an exacerbation of their problem with a precipitous recurrence of their dependency on their prior substance of choice.

These clients are treated for a variety of medical problems in the clinics at The Healing Place, both at the men’s facility and the women’s facility. We carefully avoid both narcotics and benzodiazepines. With rare exception their pain can be managed with such agents as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. If they do have intense pain such that narcotics are needed to control the pain, it is advisable for them to return to the Detoxification Unit at either of these facilities for that pain medication to be managed so that a return to drug dependency does not recur.

Please keep this last measure in mind for such patients. Realize that a few days in the “Detox” Unit is of no charge to these individuals and is much preferred over sliding back into a pattern of addiction.

Obviously to avoid this pitfall, one needs to be knowledgeable about a history of addiction. The clients of The Healing Place are instructed to inform their prescribing professional of this addiction. Also, the professional is wise to make some inquiry of all patients regarding past history so as to avoid such prescription. We have seen Healing Place graduates have their devastating addiction exacerbated by relatively benign Vicodin prescribed following a minor dental or surgical procedure. This disease of addiction is life-long in its risk, and needs proper attention to avoid relapse.

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