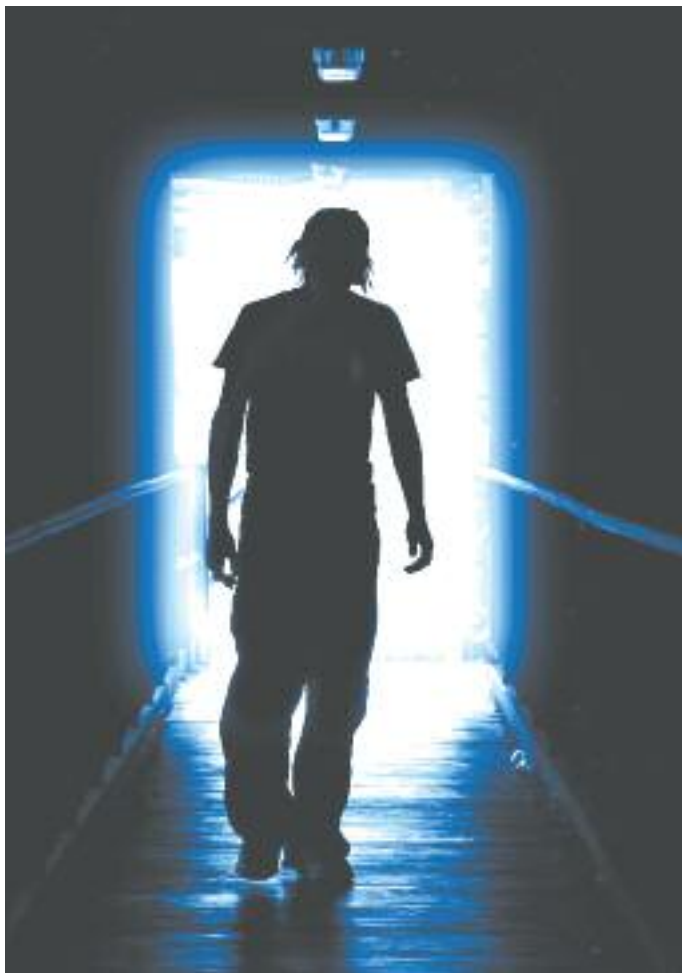


Health and Wellness

Another Dead Junkie: What it says about healthcare and why you should care.



This September celebrates the 20th anniversary of National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month. For those who have managed to defeat the odds and save their life or that of a loved one, the month brings a sigh of relief that a deadly, all-consuming nightmare has ended. But many others will see the month as a sign that yet another year has come and gone with no answers and no solutions.

Such is the case of Korey L. Kardos. He was a 23 year old man who died in custody at the Westmoreland county jail after reportedly enduring 10 days of heroin withdrawal. According to the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, his family has filed a wrongful death suit against the county and prison officials claiming that the prison neglected to provide him needed medical care, resulting in his death. His family has now joined the many that will spend national recovery month in overwhelming grief.

Online versions of the story have been flooded with comments and blogs conveying that the responsibility for this death lies at the feet of the deceased and his family. "One less druggie on the street" commented one blogger on the WPXI website. Another person claimed "a close family does

not let drugs take hold. Yes he's doing an illegal drug and he's a lowlife." One person lamented the massive financial expenditure for addiction (an estimated \$500 billion per year), writing "It sounds like they successfully cured his addiction. No more addict. No more addiction. No more wasted taxpayer dollars keeping him alive." Another comment read, "I'm tired of prison inmates getting better health coverage and food than me and I work 40 hours a week at a fortune 500 company. The County should sue his family for having to house him and feed him till he expired."

If you are one of the people that concur with these sentiments, consider your reaction if you were told Corey L. Kardos was a diabetic, not an addict. What if the story reported that a 23 year old man died in prison from diabetic shock due to lack of medical care? And what if his diabetes was the type caused by years of junk food, lack of exercise and alcohol use? Would you still feel the same about him or his death?

This case definitely demonstrates one thing: addiction is a medical issue with physical symptoms that can be deadly if left untreated. It is also more comparable to other health problems than most assume. Nutritionally induced diabetes occurs when a person consumes too much "feel good" sugar and fat causing their body to become desensitized to insulin. Addicts consume too much "feel good" drugs or alcohol, causing their body to become overly toxic. This causes their GI tract to stop absorbing nutrients and therefore results in malnutrition and dehydration. Malnutrition and dehydration can be lethal, just like diabetic shock.

One intuitive blogger responded to the story with the question, "What about someone who got lung cancer from smoking?" Again, lung cancer is a health issue that is more likely to occur as a result of unhealthy choices like smoking. But smoking is not typically the root cause of death, as is the case with heroin withdrawal. The cancer possibly caused by smoking can cause death, similar to malnutrition and dehydration that can occur with heroin withdrawal.

The fact is, most Americans engage in some unhealthy activities on a regular basis. Whether our vices include eating fast food, drinking more than our fair share at happy hour or hitting the couch instead of the gym, very few of us are the model of health. To say that addicts deserve a lesser quality of care than anyone else who has made conscious choices to exacerbate their own physical demise is simply throwing stones from a glass house.

THE BLAME GAME

As the story of Corey Kardos plays out in the media, the question of responsibility will naturally coincide. As the answer is gradually fleshed out, there are a few things we all need to consider. First, heroin addiction is widely regarded as non-lethal in the treatment community. It is identified as

painful and consisting of some of the most undesirable symptoms in the human condition such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, severe cramping, sweating, increased sensitivity to pain, insomnia and restless leg syndrome. Therefore, the standard of care dictates that the condition of heroin withdrawal does not require immediate medical attention. But regardless of cause, vomiting and diarrhea continuing for more than a few days necessitate medical attention to avoid death from starvation and dehydration.

Now here is where the whole issue of responsibility gets dicey. Research has demonstrated that addicts often suffer from severe malnutrition and immunosuppression. A 2002 study in the British Journal of Nutrition reports that clinical signs of malnutrition were diagnosed in 74% of addicts and 60% were suffering from multiple forms of malnutrition. Of the participants, 60% were found to have varying degrees of chronic energy deficiency (CED). Select biochemical indices demonstrated that 60% of the addicts had anemia and protein deficiencies and 74% demonstrated clinical signs of nutrient deficiencies. Keep in mind that the 253 participants were matched with 100 non-addicted men according to comparable age, weight, and socioeconomic status in order to determine the statistical significance of the study.

From this data it seems easy to conclude that addicts are physically sick—not just immoral or behaviorally compromised. One has only to imagine how it might feel to be experiencing these health issues and the pain and discomfort associated with them. Then consider the idea that the simple administration of a drug or glass of liquor can effectively mask these symptoms, make the discomfort disappear and establish the cognitive illusion of wellness. This suddenly makes it easier to understand the compulsion to continue drug or alcohol use. This understanding is further expanded when you consider that treatment facilities, designed to specifically and effectively address addiction, are also missing the chronic illness component of this issue.

Despite the aforementioned statistics, which have been researched and published since the 1950's, most treatment programs do not perform medical testing to determine the current condition of an addict's health upon admission to treatment. This makes it highly unlikely that a prison would provide such care in the case of heroin addiction, since such a standard has not been set. Many would now turn their blame to the treatment system for ritualistically cramming addicts into group sessions while they fight to maintain stability despite severely compromised physical health. But the decision to provide service is based almost entirely upon the payer system. All businesses provide services for which they can receive appropriate payment. Addiction treatment is primarily paid for by commercial and government funded insurance companies and county funding, all of which refuse to pay for nutritional testing, dietary guidance, and micronutrient infusions in addiction treatment. Yet hospitals often provide micronutrient infusions to addicts and alcoholics as a first line of treatment. This is because they are treating the diagnoses of dehydration and starvation. These medical professionals couldn't care less what causes the malnutrition, just like an



oncologist doesn't care what caused someone's lung cancer and an endocrinologist doesn't refuse a diabetic care because he glutted his way to diabetes .

This would leave the issues of judgment and diagnosis as the catalysts of miscommunication in this tragic event. If the prison staff had reserved judging this patient and his lifestyle choices, they might have seen through the heroin withdrawal and determined the client was growing dehydrated and/or malnourished. If he had been diagnosed with starvation and dehydration he would likely have received appropriate medical care, and if he had not we would all be more inclined to blame those who refused to provide him proper medical attention. But when the cause is labeled as heroin withdrawal, our collective empathy diminishes.

Perhaps our understanding of addiction has not evolved along the same lines as our understanding of other self-perpetuated health problems. Because our society continues to attack addicts as exclusively responsible for their physical ailments, we have compromised our ability to effectively treat the problem and move toward decreasing the burden this massive health expenditure places on all our lives. As for Corey, if his death was in fact caused by malnutrition as the story has been reported, he starved in a cold jail cell as he vomited and defecated his way to his death. For him, there is no hope for a productive Recovery Month, but for the rest of us....