

# America's war on prescription drug abuse

**BY Navar Watson - NWatson@chronicle-tribune.com | Posted: Thursday, May 19, 2016 6:00 am**

The significant rates at which people are becoming addicted to and dying from prescription medications is a uniquely American problem, said a national prescription drug speaker from a Seattle law firm May 18.

Former U.S. Attorney for Washington State Ronald Friedman, now at Karr Tuttle Campbell, addressed members of the Grant County Heroin Task Force, JEAN Team and Marion General Hospital yesterday, discussing the “bouncing ball of prescription drug abuse” in the United States.

“For a long, long time we (U.S.) looked outward,” he said. “We wanted to blame everyone else for our own problems ... (but) we’ve got to own this problem. It’s uniquely ours.”

Many people saw prescription drug abuse as a joke until the mid-2000s, Friedman said, when overdose deaths from prescription drugs surpassed those caused by cocaine, meth and heroin.

He attributed the jump to a rise of drug supply in the 2000s and the growing dependency Americans have on pain relief.

“There’s a belief in American culture that we shouldn’t have to experience pain,” he said.

Two years ago, MGH began tightening regulations on opioid prescriptions. A year later, the number of prescribed opioid pills dropped by 100,000, according to Ann Vermilion, administrative director of medical staff services and community outreach at the hospital.

Friedman said because of this change, Marion has seen “more recent success” than most other counties in the U.S.

Still, drug overdoses remain the leading cause of accidental death in the county, he said. Today, drug seekers are increasingly alternating between opiates and heroin, since heroin is cheaper.

MGH realized this in Grant County, as heroin use spiked when opioids dropped. The amount of heroin overdoses in Grant County jumped from four in 2013 to 43 in 2015.

“We have to change the behavior of the public,” William Granger, president of the Grant County Medical Society, said. “That’s going to be the only thing that is going to be a long-term solution.”

According to Friedman, the leading prescribed drug in the United States is hydrocodone, known commercially as Vicodin – a highly addictive narcotic, used to treat nearly any type of pain.

The issue, Friedman said, is physicians and dentists prescribe 20 to 30 pills at a time when only five or six may be necessary. He issued a word of caution for anyone who has Vicodin and other highly addictive drugs.

“Take no more than is needed,” he said. “Stop as soon as you can ... and don’t keep stores of it in your home after you get better. Get rid of it.”

Friedman said further education is one of the best ways to help the problem, as well as cities implementing partnerships with law enforcement, physicians and pharmaceutical companies in an attempt to address the problem together.

Marion has served as a good model for this, he said.

“We need to work together,” Friedman said. “We need to own it as our problem and realize it’s us. It’s American culture.”