

John: Work together to prevent substance abuse in communities

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As an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, I've spent more than 20 years treating patients of all ages. My responsibility extends beyond the walls of my office, involving far more than extracting teeth or fixing fractured jaws. I continuously advocate for my patients' overall health and well-being — before, during and after their time in my care. As we observe National Substance Abuse Prevention month, this commitment has never been more vital.

In 2017, the opioid crisis was declared a public health emergency, and today it remains a major challenge. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 10.1 million people misused prescription opioids in the past year. Nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers has been the second most common form of illicit drug use in the country for more than a decade.

As an oral surgeon, I've seen how vulnerable young people can be. It's common for teenagers to undergo wisdom tooth removal, often accompanied by an opioid prescription for post-surgical pain. Unfortunately, these opioids can open the door to addiction, leading to deadly consequences.

The first step in combating substance abuse is talking about it. Many of my patients are teens or young adults, and I make it a point to engage in these conversations with them and their parents. I urge parents to be fully aware of the risks associated with prescription painkillers given to their children.

Alternative pain management strategies are essential. In many cases, over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen and acetaminophen are just as effective in controlling post-surgical pain. Ice packs can also help manage swelling and discomfort.

Talking about substance abuse might feel uncomfortable, but it's necessary. Open dialogue reduces the stigma around substance use, creating a safer space for vulnerable patients. This includes those with mental health disorders, previous histories of substance abuse, and, especially, our younger population.

Teenagers and young adults are at higher risk for substance misuse due to peer pressure, stress and curiosity. Healthcare providers and parents must work together to ensure young people understand the real risks of opioid misuse.

Providers should take the time to educate patients and their families, and parents should feel empowered to ask questions. It's also crucial to dispose of unused medications properly. National Prescription Drug Take Back Day, Oct. 26, provides a safe way to do this and reduces the chances of these drugs falling into the wrong hands.

This day is a vital initiative, offering a simple but effective way to reduce the availability of unused opioids and other prescription drugs. I encourage everyone to check their medicine cabinets and safely dispose of medications.

While opioids have dominated the conversation about substance abuse, it's equally important to address marijuana. As it becomes more widely legalized and accepted, the potential for abuse has grown. Unfortunately, the discussion around its regulation hasn't kept pace with its increasing potency. Today's marijuana is far stronger than it was decades ago, and I believe we lack sufficient regulation to safeguard our communities.

Marijuana abuse is an issue that isn't talked about enough, especially considering its effects on young, developing brains. As a healthcare provider, I see this as a growing concern. It's crucial that we have open conversations and implement stronger protections to prevent marijuana misuse, just as we do with opioids. The responsibility to regulate and educate is a shared one, and we must act now before it becomes a larger problem.

While National Substance Abuse Prevention Month and Take Back Day are important markers, our responsibility to prevent substance abuse extends year-round. As a healthcare provider, I am committed to educating my patients about the risks of opioid and marijuana use and offering alternatives whenever possible. As a community member, I'm dedicated to raising awareness about Take Back Day and other prevention initiatives.

Substance abuse doesn't have to remain a silent epidemic. Together, we can bring it into the light, ensuring our communities are places where young people feel supported, informed and empowered to make healthier choices.

Dr. Robert John is an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, founder of Troy Oral Surgery, and advocate for substance abuse prevention.