

‘From Statistics to Solutions:’ a substance abuse conference

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By [Kevin Miller](#)

Hennepin Technical College hosted a May 11 substance abuse conference called “From Statistics to Solutions,” featuring experts in the field



Carol Falkowski, CEO of Drug Abuse Dialogues and former director of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division of the Minnesota Department of Human Services, speaks at Hennepin Technical College on May 11. (Sun Post staff photo by Kevin Miller)

including keynote speaker Carol Falkowski, CEO of Drug Abuse Dialogues and former director of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division of the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

The conference also hosted panels where experts discussed the effect drug abuse has on the brain, and the relationship between co-occurring disorders and addiction.

Opioid abuse and addiction were common topics at the conference. Opioid overdose deaths more than doubled in Hennepin County last year, increasing from 97 in 2015 to 153 in 2016.

“It has been the case for a while here as well as nationally that heroin deaths surpass traffic deaths, and now most recently they surpass gun homicides,” Falkowski said. “This is also unprecedented. Just as recently as 2007, gun homicides outnumbered heroin deaths by 5 to 1.” Synthetic opioids have added a new element of danger to opioid use, Falkowski said. Carfentanil and fentanyl are synthetic opioid that have roots in medical uses as painkillers, with the former being used by veterinarians to sedate large animals like elephants and the latter a painkiller used to treat severe or post-surgery pain, that is similar to morphine but 50-100 times more powerful. “We now have synthetic fentanyl that’s not the medical fentanyl coming in from China and

showing up in counterfeit pills, which are knock-off pills that look like Oxycodone, or they look like norco, or they look like, even Xanax, but they are being mixed into that with fatal results because fentanyl is such a potent drug,” Falkowski said.

In Hennepin County, there were 10 fentanyl related deaths in 2015. In 2016, there were 39 fentanyl-related deaths in the county. Of those deaths, two-thirds involved other drugs, meaning the user likely thought they were buying a different illicit drug that normally would not contain fentanyl, according to Falkowski.

“We have never had this situation, where we have a contamination of a poisoning of the supply of illegal drugs, whether it’s powdered, or whether it’s pills,” Falkowski said.

“While using drugs has always been a case of Russian roulette, you don’t really know what you’re getting, the consequences of not knowing what you’re getting have never been this great,” she added.

Prevention is becoming increasingly important, Falkowski said. For instance, doctors need to undergo more formal training on addiction during their education,” she said.

Parents and schools need better tools to discuss drugs with children, she said.

There are areas where the current treatment model could be improved, according to Falkowski. Counselors who have personally gone through recovery have a tendency to prescribe the same treatment methods that helped pull them out of addiction. Falkowski called this the “what worked for me is going to work for you,” model. This is not an effective way to administer treatment, she said.

The industry also has a tendency to avoid prescribing medication to lessen the effects of addiction and withdraw symptoms on opioid uses, she said.

“We have medication for opioid disorders, yet only 35 percent of opioid treatment programs used them in 2008, and that had fallen to 28 percent in 2012,” according to Falkowski. “We have treatment programs that develop and deliver treatment based on ideology, not on science ... Here we have [medications] that can reduce the craving for people, and yet we don’t use them? I think that’s a really sorry state of affairs.”

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