

Combating the drug war

By LIZ JENNINGS

MELROSE — The city has a drug problem. The topic is not a pleasant one. Kids are dying of drug overdoses and according to Melrose Police Detective Sergeant Barry Campbell, younger kids are falling into the same trap despite seeing their peers' lives cut tragically short.

The Weekly News spoke to public officials, many of whom are parents themselves or work directly with Melrose youths to try to find out what exactly is going on.

Heroin is not a drug usually linked with suburban communities or the

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middle class. The stereotypical candidate that might come to mind is a poor, seasoned user who has dabbled in his fair share of drugs, according to Marilyn Belmonte, co-chairwoman of the Burlington Drug and Alcohol Task Force. Belmonte also runs the Citizen's Drug Recognition Academy that came to Melrose earlier in the year.

According to Belmonte, the fall of the Taliban made Afghanistan a breeding ground for the poppy plant and heroin. Additionally, reports indicate that beginning in 1990 Colombian cartels started growing and selling heroin because they saw a big market for it. Heroin is sold today for as cheap as \$4 a dose.

Its purity is different from the heroin of the past as well. Heroin used to be cut with so many additives it could only be injected. Today it is so pure that users can sniff it and get high, explained Belmonte.

With the option of sniffing the drug instead of injecting it with a needle more kids are trying it. Belmonte emphasized, however, that users will eventually inject the drug when they can no longer get high from sniffing it.

Why here?

How did heroin creep its way into Melrose? The answer may lie in the perception of the drug OxyContin.

According to Campbell the "OxyContin boom" began in 2000 and 2001. OxyContin is not unique to Melrose; it is a widespread problem.

Reports say that OxyContin abuse was responsible for a 600 percent increase in opiate related deaths in Massachusetts between 1990 and 2003. It is called a "middle class" drug and one in five teens are abusing it more than any other drug besides marijuana, according to Belmonte.

Used mainly for the treatment of terminal cancer patients, it provides a high similar to opium and heroin and therefore acts as a gateway drug to heroin.

Belmonte explained that when the cost of OxyContin becomes too great or a tolerance to OxyContin is built up, users switch to heroin.

The group of kids using both OxyContin and heroin is between the ages of 18 and 30, said Sgt. Campbell. Though he noted that police still see people in their upper 30s and 40s using, but the main problem is with the younger group.

"Kids get into OxyContin and get hooked after a few times. They then build up a tolerance. The pills cost a dollar a milligram and they end up having a \$200 a day habit," said Campbell.

According to Melrose High Principal Dr. Daniel Burke, when he arrived in Melrose it was a small

problem that he says snowballed into a bigger problem.

"I can't intelligently say whether the situation is better or worse; these things run in cycles. OxyContin has been the gateway drug for heroin and kids are fooled into thinking it is not bad for you," he said.

Belmonte says that teens and young adults experiment with prescription drugs like OxyContin because they are misinformed about them. They think because they are not so-called street drugs they are safe — a grave misunderstanding, she articulated.

"Even if you follow a doctor's orders you can still get addicted to a prescription drug," she said.

The way that the drug is taken is dangerous as well. When the pill is used correctly it is ingested and slowly released. When crushed and snorted the drug goes to the brain in one shot. Users may get a better high but get addicted right away because their brain becomes dependent upon it.

"Drugs are not a mistake you can afford to make. These drugs are extremely addictive. You cannot abuse them recreationally and then leave it," said Belmonte.

According to a report by National Public Radio, users report feeling withdrawal symptoms almost immediately after the drug wears off. If they do not continue to take the drug they are so sick that they have to get high just to feel well.

When asked why Belmonte thought youths would start down this road, she said for recreation, to cope with life stresses, to self-medicate, peer pressure and the desire to be popular.

She identified some of the stressors as academic and athletic pressures with the growing competitive nature of the world as well as pressure to fit in and dealing with problems at home.

Belmonte believes that OxyContin is plaguing middle class communities for a few reasons:

Today's generation of kids have more money to buy drugs, are less supervised, have cars to travel and pick drugs up and can use cell phones to call around to find drugs.

She also said that with parents being stretched so thin these days trying to juggle work, family and life, it is a real Catch 22 situation. Many parents need their children to have cars because they can't drive them to all their engagements, and with more parents working all the time to make ends meet they can't watch over their kids constantly.

A little further down the line

Sgt. Campbell doesn't see the drug fading out. In fact, he said that it was almost like things are going back to the way they were in the '60s and '70s.

"I don't know why they do it, and once they get hooked they are done. Only 5 percent of people beat heroin. Dealing with all the people I've dealt with between the ages of 18 and 45 I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Users will do anything to get money for a fix including stealing from family," he concluded.

Theft and break-ins, according to Belmonte, are a red flag that a community has a drug problem and police reports indicate that the number of break-ins and robberies in Melrose has steadily been increasing in recent years.

"It is a progression that I have seen in other communities. Melrose is just a little farther down the line," she said.

Belmonte also stressed that children do not learn from the deaths of their peers because they forget after time passes. Also, their brains are not yet fully developed, so they do not completely understand the consequences of engaging in risky behavior. "The young mentality is that it won't happen to me. Kids think they are invincible," she said.

What's being done

Though Melrose has a problem, the city is in no way lying down.

"If I have learned nothing, it is not to point fingers," said Dr. Burke. "We make a point in the city to step up and address problems and not sweep them under the rug. You'll find I am far more comfortable in my chair knowing that there are a

group of people working against the drug culture instead of saying, 'Well, it is not my job.' Melrose is a unique city and I admire how they have stepped up," he ended.

According to Substance Abuse Coordinator Kara Clemente, Melrose is working to find a solution to the problem.

Through a grant with the Melrose Partnership for Healthy Youth and Riverside Community Cares, Project Northland, which is an evidence-based curriculum for sixth-eighth graders, is being implemented to curb drinking. A high school phase of the program will also be implemented in Wellness education this year for ninth and 10th graders. Coordinators are making available to parents a five session program for parents of children ages 9 - 14, teaching them how to reduce the risk that their children will develop drug problems.

They have also initiated the Melrose ROCKS Campaign and hope to re-run the Citizen's Drug Recognition Academy to help parents and community members recognize the early signs and symptoms of drug use.

Although the city and the community are trying to battle this demon, what was unanimous across the board from everyone who spoke to the Weekly News was that prevention and drug awareness start at home.

"As many adults as possible need to be in our children's lives. We know they can cross the street and tie their shoes but have we taught them how to stay away from drugs?" asked Belmonte.

Sgt. Campbell said, "It is such a huge problem. Parents need to be more vigilant with their kids and check their kids out and see if there are any signs of drug use. It is frustrating for us and I'm tired of going around and photographing dead bodies; it beats you down. As a parent, I think you have to keep a close eye on your kids no matter how old they are as long as they are living in your house, and pray that they will make the right decision."