Opioid Abuse Fatality Report



The impact of the opioid crisis struck home within the Missouri physician community on Dec. 15, 2014. That’s the day when, just two months’ shy of his 30th birthday, Derek succumbed to an opioid overdose.

The news was devastating for his mother, Kelly O’Leary, a long-time volunteer with the St. Louis Metropolitan Medical Society Alliance, and her husband Timothy O’Leary, MD, a radiation oncologist at Mercy Jefferson Hospital near St. Louis.

“He was a good kid. He was very smart, and didn’t want this to happen,” Kelly said. “His death was completely unnecessary.”

By normal standards, Derek was well-accomplished for his age. He had graduated from college, earned an MBA, and served for five years in the U.S. Navy. He was engaged to be married. But, over the last 12 years, he had also struggled off and on with opioid addiction.

Derek’s involvement with opioids began innocently. In 2002, after breaking his arm playing high school football at age 17, he was prescribed Oxycontin as a normal course of pain relief. Then, playing football a year later, he broke his arm in the same place. He was prescribed Oxycontin again.

Derek had described to his mom how, beyond pain relief, the Oxycontin made him feel different.

After high school, Derek attended the University of Florida where he earned a bachelor’s degree. But Kelly could see things were not right. Following college, the family urged him to enter outpatient treatment. Kelly recalled: “He had been drinking a lot and abusing prescriptions. They found Vicadin in his system. He had liver failure at age 22 from Vicadin.”

Fortunately, the outpatient treatment was successful. Derek worked for a year and then joined the Navy where he handled radar and sonar. In the Navy, sailors are drug tested regularly, Kelly noted.

But in his fifth year in the Navy, he ran into bad luck and injured his knee. Navy surgeons performed an experimental surgery. Unaware of Derek’s history or in spite of it, they prescribed Oxycontin. The addiction returned. Derek continued to get prescriptions from the nurse practitioner.

Eventually the Navy did realize he had a problem, and got him into treatment which he continued after his enlistment ended.

Eleven months after leaving the Navy, Derek was living in Toronto with his girlfriend. They planned to marry and move to St. Louis.

But the addiction took over. Derek was found dead in his apartment that December. The toxicology report showed his system had fentanyl, the high-potency synthetic form of heroin. They also found five prescription medications he was obtaining through the VA as a disabled veteran.