

Hitting a Higher Mark

Podcast Transcript

Episode 1: War on Opioids

Jeff Bernhard:

Hi, I'm Jeff Bernhard, Senior Vice President of Commercial Markets at Highmark. Welcome to Hitting A Higher Mark. In this podcast, we explore topics that are transforming how healthcare is delivered and paid for. Today, we will be specifically discussing addressing the opioid epidemic. We have two special guests here today with me to expand on this very important healthcare topic. First, we have Dr. Charles DeShazer, who is the Chief Medical Officer at Highmark, and we also have Dr. Caesar De Leo, Vice President and Executive Medical Director for Strategic Initiatives at Highmark. Welcome, and thank you for joining us. Now, let's get started on today's topic. Most of you are familiar with the concept of the opioid epidemic, whether our friends and family have been directly affected or someone we know has, can you explain the severity of the issue?

Dr. Charles DeShazer:

Sure. Starting in the late 1990s, the opioids were, in essence, over prescribed for various reasons and the opioid epidemic began. When you look at the state's most effected, the top five states where West Virginia, Ohio, P.A., Kentucky, and Delaware. So three of those states are in the Highmark service area, and that's one reason we declared war on opioids in 2016. And when you look at the impact, opioid overdose rate, due to many efforts, has decreased 4% from 2017 to 2018, but still more than 67,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2018, making it a leading cause of injury related death in the United States. And of those deaths, almost 70% involved a prescription or an illicit opioid.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks, Dr. DeShazer. Can you also explain Highmark's declaration and fight against the war on opioids across our footprint?

Dr. Charles DeShazer:

Absolutely. So, in 2016, we declared war on opioids as we saw the issue escalating again and really had an impact on our service area. And, in this process, we designed a three pronged strategy recognizing the interconnectedness of pain management, opioid over prescribing, and the impact of addiction. And so we wanted to attack the issue at each of those leverage points. So, number one, we wanted to make sure that in the context of pain management we really promoted and supported effective approaches to managing pain such that opioids would not be needed. So that was really the first point of attack. The second point is that at certain times opioids are necessary, so we want to ensure that opioids in that context were not prescribed. So we put in certain interventions, particularly from a pharmacy standpoint, to prevent and manage the prescribing of opioids. And then for those that were addicted, we really wanted to be aggressive in terms of mitigation strategies to reduce the impact of the morbidity and mortality of the addiction and ensure that folks get access to treatment and support

structures to really help to promote a doable recovery.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. Dr. DeLeo, how are we implementing ways to reduce the addiction rate in the regions we serve?

Dr. Caesar DeLeo:

Well, Bright Heart Health is a tele addiction service that we began in West Virginia. And then with the advent of the COVID pandemic, we rapidly expanded it to Pennsylvania and into Delaware due to increase demand. That demand was driven by isolation and increased potency of opioid products sold on the street. We also have been very active with community grants and partnerships, particularly in our Delaware market, and those are focused on community resources to reduce harm and promote education in order to combat the opioid epidemic. And then Shatterproof is a virtual education program and advocacy tool that we launched for all of our clients and Highmark employees to combat stigma through education. And then lastly, within the Highmark employee membership, we launched a program called LEARN and that stands for Learn, Educate, Advocate, Recovery, and Network. And those meetings tap into a tremendous amount of pent up energy by our employees who want to do something to help combat the substance use disorder epidemic.

Jeff Bernhard:

That's great. Dr. DeShazer, back to you, what types of resources are we providing for clinicians and first responders to utilize while on the front lines caring for patients with opioid use disorder?

Dr. Charles DeShazer:

The one of the most important aspects of our model is the integration with the delivery system, and so we've worked closely with Allegheny Health Network and their center of excellence for pain management. Again, the first step in this cascade towards addiction is ineffective pain management. And so we've worked with them very closely to really implement more effective strategies around pain management as well as appropriately prescribing opioids. We also partner with a vendor called Axial and they've got a very extensive program based on data and analytics and outreach strategies to, again, support each of the three pillars of our model, to reduce risk mitigation around opioid prescribing, through their analytics, looking at prescribing patterns of physicians in our network. I'll say, our early detection and interventions looking at patient related data and prescribing patterns to try to identify patients that may be on the pathway to addiction as well as supporting us in our treatment network as well, coordinating centers of excellence with treatment and recovery for opioid addiction. And then we also have Naloxone programs to try to get this lifesaving medication more available and more distributed within our communities.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. So how are we partnering with local communities to ensure a wide spread awareness and knowledge of what we can do to combat opioid use disorder in our communities?

Dr. Caesar DeLeo:

Jeff, in the war on opioids, there are many allies and we can't do this alone. So, first off, we've given grants and sponsorships, over \$4 million over the past several years, and this supports harm reduction.

So that's the need for Naloxone that can be distributed on the street to save lives and distributed to EMS personnel, community based drug prevention programs through Boys and Girls Clubs, and then promoting access to treatment in various services such as that. Our partnerships also extend to the FBI, the state's attorneys, local officials, and government, law enforcement, and we have programs in the schools. We work with the Pittsburgh Pirates and neighborhood organizations to educate and engage the community around opioids so that they have the wherewithal and the knowledge to combat and prevent it.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. Now, to the results. So how have we seen the opioid use decrease across our footprint since our declaration of the war on opioids?

Dr. Caesar DeLeo:

Well, Jeff, this is something that we're very proud of. In the beginning of the war on opioids, we were well above the national average in terms of opioid overdose deaths. However, through our three pronged effort, we have, since 2017, decreased the overdose rate within the Highmark membership by 70%. We are currently 50% below the national average.

Jeff Bernhard:

Incredible, incredible. Well done. So there seems to be a significant amount of work still to be done in fighting the opioid epidemic. So how are we thinking about partnering innovatively in attempts to continue this progress?

Dr. Charles DeShazer:

Dr. DeLeo had touched on one of the more innovative partnerships we've established with a company called Bright Heart. We initially focused on the West Virginia market, and what Bright Heart provides is tele psych and substance use disorder services. We've actually expanded that through our entire footprint of P.A. as well as Delaware and we think this is one of the innovative strategies to ensure that folks with substance use disorder are not disadvantaged in terms of isolation and disconnection from support services. So Bright Heart by its tele addiction services and tele psych services that are convenient and accessible, and we think this will be a key strategy for providing support.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. DeShazer, so if someone wanted to find out more information on the work that Highmark is doing around the war on opioid addiction, where would they go?

Dr. Charles DeShazer:

In fact, we've actually recently had a paper published describing in detail our three prong strategy. We can provide the link to that paper for anyone who wants to know in more detail how we've approached this issue.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thank you. And I want to thank Dr. DeShazer and Dr. De Leo. Both for joining me to discuss how and what Highmark is doing to reduce the opioid addiction rate in the regions we serve. Now, this topic is

critical because our solutions are positively impacting our friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers. I want to thank everybody for listening to this episode of Hitting A Higher Mark. Thank you.