

## Detoxification and Recovery Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Danilo M. Pangilinan, M.D., FACP, FASAM

The current COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted the lives of millions of people worldwide. We, in the medical community, are still learning more about the COVID-19 virus as more and more symptoms are being linked to it. First, there were only respiratory symptoms reported and lately, gastrointestinal symptoms have been linked to this virus. Just recently, Medscape has reported 2 rare neurologic conditions linked to COVID-19 virus which are variants of Guillain-Barre Syndrome. The symptoms are double vision, perioral numbness, and gait instability. According to Medscape, the report was published online April 17 in *Neurology*.

As of this writing, Connecticut has 28,764 reported cases, 2,339 have died and 1,592 are being treated at local hospitals. One bit of encouraging news is that the number of hospitalizations is decreasing. More drugs and vaccines are being studied to battle this pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic strikes in the midst of our battle with the opioid epidemic. The recently completed project “Changing Pathways” by Dr. Sandrine Pirard and her Staff at Beacon, in collaboration with InterCommunity Health Care and Rushford, has brought more access to care for individuals with opioid use disorder (OUD). This project enables patients in detox facilities to be initiated on either buprenorphine or methadone and referred to either residential treatment centers or medically assisted treatment programs. As more individuals are gaining access to treatment and medications to combat the opioid crisis, somehow, the COVID-19 pandemic has overshadowed our efforts.

People with the disease of addiction will have more severe COVID-19 related infection. This is because individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) may have chronic pulmonary, cardiac, kidney and liver diseases which are risk factors for developing COVID-19 infection. Homelessness, which is common among people with SUD, is another risk factor for developing COVID-19 infection as their immune system is impaired.

The current practice of social distancing and self-quarantine has posed a unique problem for these individuals. Increased stress, anxiety, and fear brought about by the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic is a trigger for drug and alcohol use, and more people are consuming more drugs and alcohol to deal with their anxiety and depression, or even just to deal with their “feeling of isolation.”

For individuals with SUD, self-quarantine and other public health measures related to COVID-19 disrupt access to medication and other support needed by these individuals. The “Harm Reduction Techniques” learned by these individuals, such as using drugs with a friend or friends who could also help in administering Narcan should overdose happens, is somehow lost during this pandemic as a result of social distancing and self-quarantine. When individuals with alcohol

use disorder (AUD) are not able to get their supply of alcohol, they are at risk for withdrawal symptoms which can be fatal.

The number of beds available at some detoxification and rehabilitation facilities has decreased because of social distancing and other public health measures brought about by this pandemic. What used to be 2 patients in one room, now became one patient per room in some facilities, such as our Recovery House. On the other hand, because of increase in relapse, loss of employment, and uncertainty about the future, more Individuals with SUD will need these services, not only now but also in the future.

Individuals with SUD may be afraid to pursue the needed detoxification and rehabilitation services for fear of contracting COVID-19 infection. In fact, the opposite is true since detoxification and rehabilitation centers follow a very strict guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

We, at InterCommunity's Detoxification Center, are constantly screening our patients and staff for symptoms of COVID-19. We provide a safe and clean environment for our patients and are ready to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff follows a set of standards to stay on top of this pandemic. We are not only offering a medically-assisted detoxification service, but also emotional support to help patients in dealing with their feelings of anxiety and depression and other issues. Our Detoxification Center is open 24/7 to serve the needs of our patients.

As Public Health Policies and Procedures (P&P) are constantly being updated regarding this pandemic, we are also constantly updating our Detoxification P&P to reflect the current needs and safety of our patients. We have a contingency plan for our patients who are being admitted for either detoxification or buprenorphine or methadone initiation to "bridge" these patients to prevent disruption of services that they need. We offer telehealth visits (MAT, Primary Care and Behavioral Health services) to patients who need our services. We encourage anyone struggling with the disease of addiction to avail themselves of our services, as Recovery Centers are safer than our neighborhoods.

In keeping with our motto "Health Care for the Whole Person", we take care of all the needs of our patients---from Addiction Services, to Residential Programs, Mental Health and Primary Care Services.

When this pandemic "settles down" we will see an influx of patients with SUD who will need our services, particularly, detoxification and other addiction services.

As a nonprofit organization, we rely entirely on our funding from the state and federal government and other grants to continue our mission. We will remain open to serve the needs of our population.