

## AHEC combats Opioid Addiction

AUGUST 30, 2019 IN [EDITORS PICKS](#), [NEWS](#)

A representative from the Heartview Foundation, Medical Director Melissa Henke, MD, visited both Dickinson and Hettinger last week to give a presentation on the opioid and addiction crisis affecting our country, even in rural North Dakota.

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Hettinger's Area Health Education Center (AHEC) funded the Heartview Foundation speaker to give talks at the local hospital and the school gymnasium.

A recent Surgeon General report spotlighted the dangerous effects of opioids on U.S. health and wellness. The report showed that in 2016, over 115 Americans died every day from opioid overdose, "devastating families and communities across the county." The report's shocking statistics, according to the local director of the western North Dakota AHEC, Denise Address, have spurred a recent funding push from federal government to tackle the opioid epidemic through agencies like AHEC.

Even though the problem is being addressed on a large scale, Address said that rural places aren't untouched from drug addiction, and places like Adams County can benefit from more education and resources regarding the problem. "I don't think you can say it isn't here," said Address. "Nobody is immune to addiction."

Dr. Henke from the Heartview Foundation in Bismarck traveled to both Hettinger and Dickinson to assist AHEC's goal of combatting opioid addiction. In Adams County, Henke spoke to local health providers and young students from both the Hettinger and Scranton communities to give the public a fresh perspective on opioids and addiction.

Henke explained that opioids are a common type of prescribed painkiller. These prescription drugs, while helpful in some cases, can become addictive and have serious side effects and risks. Common opioids include oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, and fentanyl. "What we know about opioids is that they take away the pain," said Dr. Henke at the presentation.

Dr. Henke asked the crowd to think about addiction like a disease, similar to diabetes, heart disease, or cancer. "Addiction is a disease, even though it stems from the choices that people have made," she said. She encouraged the community to see addiction as a chronic medical problem that has symptoms and treatments; people with diseases need support. Specifically, she compared addiction to type II diabetes. "If I'm diagnosed with diabetes, I see the educator, nutritionist, the pharmacist – everybody talks to me," she said. "What if we did the same thing with addiction."

Address said that she was impressed by the full gym of students attending talk, and she hopes to see a continued push towards tackling addiction in the region. "It's about saving those people, because anyone can be a productive member in society."

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