

The Dallas Morning News

Friday, September 12, 1986

VIEWPOINTS

Drug war must begin at home



MEL RIDDILE

The use of illegal drugs in our country is now the highest in the world. One of every four Americans is an occasional or frequent abuser. (Notice I say "abuser," not "user"; any use of an illicit drug is an abuse.) Twenty-three million Americans regularly use marijuana; 5 million use cocaine.

Among our young, the situation is even more alarming. Two of every three teenagers have tried an illegal drug before leaving high school. Half of all people between the ages of 11 and 17 are moderate to heavy drinkers. And the situation is getting worse. There are 5,000 first-time cocaine users every day, and they are getting younger all the time. Twenty-eight percent of the young people entering high school don't finish primarily because of a high level of drug abuse.

That's why the initiatives now coming out of Washington are so important. If all they do is raise our nation's drug-awareness level, they will have served a noble purpose, even though that is probably all they can do.

In the fight against teen-age chemical dependence the real war zone is the home. And the best form of prevention is intervention. Parents must come between their children and drugs early and often.

Ideally, the battle against drug dependence should begin before age 11 — before your child has experienced drug or alcohol activity. It's then that you must let him or her know that you are aware of their culture and the temptations they face. Set rules, expect them to be followed and then check to make sure they are. Take a restrictive look at your child's friends, restrict the places he or she is allowed to go, keep them away from "drug" events such as rock concerts and unchaperoned parties.

Even if your child is "dabbling" in drugs — you still have time to act on your own. Distasteful as it seems, it may become necessary to search his or her room, open mail and listen in on phone calls. Be open about what you are doing — and why.

If your child begins to seek drugs actively, seek professional help, just as you would with any other chronic, progressive — and terminal — disease. Chemical dependence is not "just a phase." It will not "just go away." The end result of continued drug use is the emotional, spiritual or physical death of your child.

With their political initiatives, President Reagan and Congress have taken the first vital steps toward treating our nation's drug epidemic. They have admitted it exists. They have overcome denial. They have put out the word they intend to intervene. The same message has to hit home.

Dr. Mel Riddile is executive director of Straight, the Family Treatment Program, in St. Petersburg, Fla.