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## Teen drug use called epidemic

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Teen-agers on drugs can be helped, if parents and communities will accept some responsibility, the head of a Florida drug program said Thursday.

Dr. Miller Newton, clinical director of Straight National and program director of Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg, Fla., told a joint meeting of the Exchange Club of Tuscaloosa and the Mental Health Association of Tuscaloosa County that teen-age drug use has reached epidemic proportions.

The last similar epidemic was with polio, and all the resources of the country were marshaled to battle that disease, he said.

But a similar effort to halt the flagrant drug abuse is not being made, he said.

Newton, who has a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology and a master's degree in divinity, said he became involved with the Straight program when he discovered his son was involved in alcohol and drugs.

After working in the program with his son, who was 15 at the time, and seeing the results of the work, Newton said he didn't have to think long when he was asked to join the program as a professional.

The Straight program "began as a local community response to problems in our community," Newton said.

The problem was that more and more teen-agers, from all sorts of families, were getting in trouble with the law, he said. The program was started after someone

teen-ager and the parents, Newton said.

Parents think that if their child has a drug problem, it means they as parents failed somewhere along the line, he said.

He and his wife, who were both professionals in the treatment of alcohol abuse at the time, "became co-conspirators with Mark in hiding his use," Newton said.

"Our vested interest in our own self-worth as parents caused us to be blind," he said.

But there are obvious signs parents can watch for, such as a child's loss of interest in hobbies, he said.

Newton said communities need to realize how accessible drugs are, especially in the local high school.

"Ten years ago there was a difference in crossroads rural America and the big city," he said. But today, the same drugs are available in the smallest towns as in the suburbs.

To fight drug use, communities must send clear messages, the first of which is to clean up the high schools, Newton said.

"Make high schools drug-free. It won't be easy, but it can be done," he said. "We need to send the clear message that drug use, intoxication and sale are not acceptable in the educational setting."

Newton said the most effective deterrent is to send every student caught with drugs to the office for an automatic suspension and to notify the youth's parents.

This action will not only help clean up the schools, but will also

connected the teen-agers' problems with drug use.

Straight attempts to use peer pressure in a positive way to help the adolescents become drug-free and stay that way, Newton said.

He said newcomers to the program are assigned to teen-agers who have been there longer to be helped. Older youths who have completed the program serve as counselors.

The program has spread to a number of other states and has served more than 3,000 children since it began, Newton said.

He said those who deny the seriousness of the drug problem do not realize the death rate among young people is increasing while in all other age groups it is decreasing.

Newton said a study conducted by Straight of teens who had died in accidents, suicides and homicides showed that 92 percent of them had intoxicating levels of marijuana, alcohol or other drugs at the time of their death.

By contrast, 40-50 percent of the accident victims who are not teen-agers have drugs or alcohol in their systems, he said.

But youths with drug problems are often treated in mental facilities or given counseling without having their real problem discovered, Newton said.

The teen can successfully hide his drug use from parents and from himself, he said.

"One of the pieces of the disease is radical or pathological denial of the problem," both by the

force the student and his parents to recognize the problem, he said.

The real extent of use in the community and damage it has caused must be acknowledged before drug use can be effectively combated, he said.

Drug laws should also be strictly enforced, so teen-agers will know that when they are caught with drugs, even a small amount, they will be taken to jail. Now the usual procedure is to confiscate the drugs while the teens themselves suffer no other consequences of their actions, he said.

But the most important thing is for adults to reverse the trend toward "romanticizing" adolescence and to give teen-agers the guidance they need, Newton said.

"Adolescence is a painful, awkward experimental period of earning how to be an adult," he said. "But just when kids are learning to fly, we've taken the safety net away."

Teen-agers should be given a chance to make decisions on their own, but should also be guided in those decisions until they can stand alone, Newton said.

He said that unless steps are taken to stop drug use among adolescents, the country will lose "a whole generation of young people."

"Our lives are worth only what we are able to share with the next generation," he said. "If their eyes are glassy and their hands are shaking, they can't grasp the torch when we pass it on."