

Arab-American community comes to grips with drugs



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(Photo: Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)

Ghada Abdallah knew her cousin hadn't died of a heart attack like relatives claimed. It was a drug overdose — but, she says, that's a taboo subject among Muslims, so loved ones kept up the charade.

Abdallah said her cousin, a Dearborn resident whom she declined to name because it would potentially embarrass their family, turned to heroin after getting hooked on pain pills.

Painkiller addiction is a growing problem nationwide, but in Dearborn, which has a large Muslim population, experts say the issue is exacerbated by addicts refusing to seek help because they fear being ostracized.

Abdallah, a pharmacist, has made it her mission to change the culture of denial, although she says it's not

easy.

"This is a huge problem, but when people talk about drug addiction in the Muslim culture, they're shunned," said Abdallah, 36, a Grosse Pointe resident who grew up in Dearborn. "If you mention that someone is addicted to drugs, people get mad at you."

Dearborn Police Chief Ronald Haddad agreed drugs and drug addiction affects the Muslim community just like it does every other one.

"Muslim kids are like every kid in America — a lot of them are getting hooked. But there is a stigma in the community that stops people from discussing drug abuse, which poses yet another challenge to effective solutions."

In 2011, there were about 500 drug-related arrests in Dearborn. That has doubled in each of the past two years to more than 1,000, Haddad said. About 25 percent of the arrests involved prescription painkillers, he said.

"We've made more arrests, but we can't arrest our way out of this problem," he said. "The best chance of doing something about this problem is to increase public awareness. People need to speak up."

Days after her cousin's March 2015 death, Abdallah said she mentioned the situation to her friend Zainab Jaafer-Chami, who told her the same thing had happened to her cousin: He died of a drug overdose, but his family refused to acknowledge the cause of death.

The deaths have motivated the two women to get more drug-addicted Muslims to come forward and seek help.

"We went to a board meeting at a mosque (on Jan. 21), and we presented some facts and figures," Abdallah said. "I asked the people at the board meeting: How many times do we have to go to funerals of young people who die from drug overdoses? Everyone in the room was nodding."

Imam Hassan Al-Qazwini of the Azzahra Islamic Center said the meeting was eye-opening. He then joined the two women at a Feb. 10 "Opiate Summit" in Detroit, which was sponsored by the Greater Detroit Health Council.

"I knew there was a problem, but I wasn't aware of how bad it was until they showed the statistics," Al-Qazwini said. "The Arab-American community is like every other community in this country, meaning they're affected by drugs. But among Muslims, there is a taboo, and that causes even more problems."

Educating the community

Al-Qazwini said he's since integrated drug education into his sermons. His Feb. 12 sermon, "The Drug Problem in Our Community No One Wants to Talk About," has [been posted to YouTube. \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xBbUqe9Ez0\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xBbUqe9Ez0)

"Many of us think that by not talking about the subject, we can prevent it," he told his congregation. "Drug abuse ... is threatening the well-being of our community. Many of you attend a funeral of a young man without you knowing this young man died because of (drugs). Because we don't talk about the cause of death; it's a stigma."

"But by not talking about the subject ... we're not solving any problems. Indeed, all we're doing is, we're allowing young men to die because of this. So we do have to talk about this. We have to educate our community."

Nearly a quarter of the drug arrests in Dearborn involve prescription drugs, according to Cpl. Russell Faith, a Dearborn police narcotics officer who said the majority of those arrested are Arab-American.

In January, Dearborn police arrested a woman Haddad said was a major distributor of illegal prescription drugs in the city: Yvette Johnson, who pleaded guilty to controlled substance, obtained by fraud. She is scheduled to be sentenced April 21 in Wayne Circuit Court.

Haddad said Johnson illegally obtained doctors' registration numbers, which she used to call in multiple opioid prescriptions in other peoples' names. She then picked up the drugs from pharmacies, and sold them on the street, Haddad said.

"People like that are in it for the dollars, and they don't care how many lives they destroy," Haddad said.

Prescription for death

Nationwide, the number of fatal painkiller overdoses has more than tripled since 2001, from about 6,000 to nearly 20,000, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

In Michigan, painkillers accounted for 1,001 of the 5,062 fatal overdoses between 2009 and 2013, according to the state health department.

Dearborn police in 2015 responded to seven fatal overdoses and at least 231 nonfatal overdoses, dozens of which involved painkillers.

"The problem is, if a doctor prescribes something, people think that's OK," Haddad said. "Then, the next thing you know, people get hooked. People need to understand: These drugs are highly addictive. People need to monitor their intake."

As a pharmacist, Abdallah says she refuses to fill some prescriptions.

"If someone walks in with a prescription for Vicodin, and I know the doctor is a crook, I won't do it," she said. "There are doctors out there who I know are writing prescriptions for people who don't need them. They call them 'pill mills.'

"We've become more diligent in not dispensing medication to everyone, but that's a double-edged sword. What do you do? Put yourself in my shoes: Do you deny pain medication to someone who may be in pain? Or do you prescribe the medication, knowing they may turn around and sell it?"

Abdallah said she's faced some backlash for her efforts to shed light on the drug problem in the Muslim community.

"I don't care," she said. "This is my mission, and I won't let anything get in my way."

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Drug discussion

What: Former Los Angeles Times reporter and author Sam Quinones will discuss trends in pain medication and street drug addiction. Quinones wrote a book, "Dreamland" about how painkillers and a recent influx of heroin are threatening American communities. The seminar is part of the Family Center's "Ask the Experts Talks" series.

Where: Grosse Pointe War Memorial, 32 Lake Shore Drive, Grosse Pointe Farms

When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday

Cost: Free

To register: Go to www.familycenterweb.org or call (313) 432-3832

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