

Thomas McLellan explains how Affordable Care Act will transform substance abuse treatment



03/01/13 - Thomas McLellan, former drug czar for President Obama and author of a mandate in the Affordable Care Act that mental health and substance-use disorder services are essential, spoke to 300 people at the Jon Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium Friday at the Coconut Grove. (Jondi

SANTA CRUZ -- Thomas McLellan, a Pennsylvania researcher who spent a year as President Barack Obama's deputy drug czar, predicted Friday that the Affordable Care Act will "transform" substance abuse treatment and lower health care costs,

He spoke to 300 doctors, nurses, therapists and other health professionals at the annual Jon Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium at the Coconut Grove.

A veteran addiction treatment researcher, he went to Washington after one of his sons died of an overdose of anti-anxiety medications and alcohol. He wrote the requirement for mental health and substance-use disorder services to be "essential," with the federal government picking up the tab for prevention.

"We've had it all wrong," McLellan said of experts who attributed addiction to bad habits, bad parenting or weak will and prescribed education. "Addiction is a complex chronic condition. It can't be cured, but it can and should be insured, managed and evaluated like other chronic illnesses."

Experts have been wrong before, he said, noting fresh air was prescribed for tuberculosis until the cause was found to be bacteria.

The old-fashioned substance abuse treatment is a program, 30 days or 60 days with a graduation, "but it doesn't work," McLellan said.

"They don't have a 30-day diabetes program," he added, getting a laugh from the audience.

People with substance abuse problems should be able to visit a doctor or clinic, get home visits, alcohol and drug testing, anti-craving medications, monitoring and smoking cessation treatment covered 100 percent, he said.

5-minute talk

As for savings, he said a Washington state study found a 5-minute "motivational interview" on ways to cope and reduce substance abuse cut health care costs by \$4,000 per patient in one year.

"If that makes a difference, why aren't we doing it in schools?" asked Soquel High sophomore Joe Martin.

Recovery counselor Don MacDonald said the new approach fits with SmartRecovery.org, a group he leads at 8 p.m. Tuesdays at Calvary Episcopal Church, 532 Cedar St.

"I've seen a lot of addiction," said Alishia Dauterive, a senior at Harbor High who plans to study psychology. "People get talked to, but they never get an incentive to find help."

Dr. Freddie Weinstein, chief medical officer at Dominican Hospital, pointed out primary care doctors in a 15-minute appointment "would be lucky" to get in two questions on drugs or drinking.

Physicians don't get much training in addiction, he said, and the state medical board, which could mandate education as it has for end-of-life care, hasn't done so for substance abuse.