Neonatal abstinence syndrome is a complex disorder prevalent in children who were exposed to drugs in the womb. NAS babies can show varying degrees of symptoms that include trembling, sleep problems, sweating, and fever.

In 2018, 927 babies were born with NAS in Tennessee. In that same year, more than six million prescriptions for painkillers were written and 1,304 overdose deaths were reported.

Jennifer Tourville, clinical assistant professor of nursing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has witnessed firsthand the suffering of NAS babies and the destruction that opioids cause.

Although she began her nursing career in an intensive care unit, she realized quickly that working with adults in a hospital setting was not the direction she wanted to take. Tourville returned to school to study primary care pediatrics and found her true passion—working with newborns.

Shortly after joining UT’s College of Nursing, she began mentoring students on small projects involving NAS babies. As she continued working with these infants, she realized there was a larger issue that needed to be addressed—that of opioid use disorder.

“We have to go back to the beginning—to the source of the problem,” Tourville said.

“As those sources became more apparent, so did the opportunities for new efforts in addressing the opioid crisis. Tourville is part of an interdisciplinary team involving four academic areas—nursing, public health, pharmacy, and communications—that have come together to lead a rural community opioid response program.

Healing Opioid Use Disorder through Prevention and Expertise, also known as Project HOPE, focuses on helping rural communities mitigate the consequences of the opioid crisis through community engagement, outreach, and activities.

Taking an education-based approach, Project...
Trying to Make A
DIFFERENCE

HOPE provides a prevention and education curriculum for youth, expert training and education on mental health and substance use disorders for providers, and workforce development and training for community service providers.

“Opioid use disorder affects everybody in this country,” Tourville said. “It affects our health care system, the state budget, children and families, and so much more. It has fingers in every aspect of our community and it spreads everywhere.”

Tourville is hopeful that education will help individuals in rural communities begin to understand the science behind addiction and reduce the stigma for people who use drugs.

“A lot of people don’t understand how opioids affect the brain and why those suffering from substance use disorder make bad choices,” she said. “These drugs destroy the frontal lobe of the brain, which is the area used for making decisions.”

The project has received enormous support from the 10 communities currently involved.

“The communities’ involvement is extremely encouraging to see,” Tourville indicated. “It’s rewarding to see people willing and wanting to get involved and to help people who some consider an undesirable population.”

Tourville encourages those interested to make connections and get involved.

“Start going to task force meetings or other community meetings,” she suggested. “Just show up and connect with people.”

In addition to her dedication and commitment to Project HOPE, Tourville continues her clinical practice working with infants.

Learn more about Project HOPE at tnopioid.utk.edu.

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