Treating Fentanyl Addiction at the Olympia Bupe Clinic

By Samantha Ritchie, M.D.

Most people have heard of fentanyl, the drug that is responsible for the big increase in overdose deaths here in Washington as well as in the rest of the United States. But many people have not heard of Buprenorphine, a medication used to help those addicted to fentanyl.

Buprenorphine is the active ingredient in Suboxone. Buprenorphine (Bupe) has some very helpful characteristics. For example, it is in the same class of medicines as fentanyl, heroin, or oxycodone, but in people who are used to taking these drugs, bupe does not cause euphoria. In general, when people are on buprenorphine, they stop having cravings to use fentanyl. That’s a huge relief for people whose lives have been upended by cravings. And unlike other opioids, bupe has very little effect on a person’s breathing. (Fentanyl often kills people because it stops their respiratory drive.) Bupe bonds very strongly to opioid receptors in the body—so strongly that when a person is on buprenorphine, they are much less likely to die of a fentanyl overdose. This is because the buprenorphine blocks the opioid receptors, and fentanyl can’t attach to them. In fact, when a person gets on buprenorphine, their death rate from any cause drops by 50%.

There are only three medicines that are FDA approved to treat addiction, and buprenorphine is one of them. (The other two are methadone and naltrexone.) Bupe can now be prescribed by any medical provider who can write for controlled substances, but lots of doctors don’t write for this lifesaving medicine because they don’t feel like they know enough about it. Here in Olympia, at the Olympia Bupe Clinic, providers are very comfortable prescribing buprenorphine and have helped hundreds of Thurston County neighbors with opioid use disorder. The clinic offers people who are addicted to fentanyl choices about how to initiate buprenorphine treatment. Some people want a slow start onto bupe, to cut down on the chance of getting sick while making the transition. Others want a rapid start, to get the transition over with. The providers at the bupe clinic talk over all the options with the patients, and together they decide the best route to take.

In the near future, the clinic also plans to offer buprenorphine in a once a month shot version, called Sublocade.

Some people with substance use disorder want help getting off fentanyl but don’t want to get on a medicine like buprenorphine, because it is in the opioid category. They would like to try a medicine like naltrexone, which has no opioid qualities at all. The Olympia Bupe Clinic offers that too, in the form of an injectable medicine called Vivitrol.

The Olympia Bupe Clinic, located just off East Side Street, is a low barrier clinic, which means it tries to make it as easy as possible for people with substance use disorder to become healthier. The clinic employs multiple peers, people who have experienced addiction themselves and are now in recovery. The peers are the heart and soul of the Bupe Clinic.

For more information, see our website at crcoly.org, or call 360-349-0033.