Health Professionals & Substance Use

A health-care professional is not often the type of person someone would picture as being someone with a substance use/misuse problem. In fact, most people would usually perceive a health-care professional as being someone who might help a substance abuser seek treatment and get well. Health-care professionals are usually the ones promoting health. However, health-care professionals are people too; they make mistakes just like the rest of us and are not immune to substance abuse. Although health-care professionals are susceptible to addictions like the rest of society, the factors contributing to their substance use/misuse problem, and the pattern of behaviour that they might exhibit which gives away their addiction, are slightly different than those of the general population.

Like most people, health-care professionals can experience the same situations or factors that contribute to substance use/misuse such as low social support, low self-esteem, family problems, psychological disorders and stress, to name a few. However, there are particular aspects of the nursing and medical professions that put health-care professionals at a greater risk, in addition to the typical factors. Nurses and doctors may be more susceptible to drug use/misuse due to stress, easy access to controlled substances, contact with people who are seriously ill and dying and long hours of practice. Doctors may also treat themselves with controlled prescription drugs which could potentially lead to addiction. As well, several areas of medicine and nursing in particular result in higher rates of substance abuse among their practitioners. These include emergency, psychiatry and anaesthesiology. It is thought that people who have a predisposition toward substance use/misuse may be more likely to choose to enter into these particular specialties.

The process of addiction, along with the patterns of behaviour a substance-using health professional might show, is also different from that of your typical substance abuser. Health professionals are quite good at hiding the problem, and function well until the problem is seriously advanced and the end stage of substance abuse is reached. They work hard to keep the problem invisible. Usually, the initial symptoms include a change in their personal relationships and a decrease in community involvement. Although a drug user would usually tend to experience a decrease in work performance, or might be frequently absent, health-care professionals who are abusing drugs tend to not show impairment related to job performance until they have already developed a significant substance abuse problem. This is because the workplace is generally the source of their addiction and is where they obtain their drug supply. In contrast, if the drug is obtained away from the workplace, they would frequently be absent, arrive late or leave early.

If a health-care professional is a substance abuser and obtaining their drug supply at work, they might do this by diverting the drug. Indicators that a health-care professional is potentially diverting drugs from the workplace for recreational purposes might be signing out more controlled substances than co-workers, reporting more medication spills or wastes, excessively administering PRN (take as needed) pain medications to patients, waiting until alone to open narcotics, evidence that someone has tampered with the medication containers, and being defensive when questioned about medication errors, to name a few.

Substance abuse among health-care professionals is an important issue to address as it not only affects the health and well-being of the substance abuser, but also that of the patients they care for. Education is an important part of prevention, and medical and nursing school curricula should cover topics pertaining to substance abuse among the profession. As well, hospital and professional organizations should put programs in
place to acknowledge the need for education about substance abuse among health-care professionals and to aid in the early identification and intervention of substance abuse among staff. A supportive atmosphere in which individuals feel confident coming forward with the issue, as well as support for recovered substance abusers in their re-entry to safe professional practice should be provided.