

No Stigma. No Judgment. Tackling the Addiction Epidemic One Patient at a Time

For 20-year-old Sundus Ali, addiction isn't just a disease. It's an ever-present threat to her survival.



PHOTO CREDIT: ALEX CARROLL

"It's like standing in front of a bus and knowing the bus is going to hit you and you're going to lose everything and everyone, and still not being able to move," she said.

Sundus was raised in an abusive home, with a father who was addicted to alcohol and drugs. She started drinking when she was eight to cope with severe

physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. She got into hard drugs at 11. When she was 17, she woke up to discover her friend, who was sleeping in her room, had died of an overdose. She knew that if she didn't get help, she was probably next.

"Something broke," she said. "I just was like, 'I can't keep doing this. I need to get clean.'" After trying numerous treatment programs, Sundus eventually found her way to the Hennepin Healthcare Addiction Medicine Clinic. She said walking through those doors put her on a new path toward hope.

"To say it is literally my lifeline isn't an exaggeration," said Sundus. "It's factual. I would probably be dead without this place, because in certain points of my life, this is all that I had."

As is often the case with substance use disorders (SUDs), Sundus' path hasn't been smooth or easy, but she knows she finally has a team that is on her side.

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SUNDUS ALI

"When we come here, we have doctors who care and who respect you as a human being," said Sundus. "Here, if you are going to have a doctor, you're going to have 120 percent of them. When they're with you they're not answering the phone. They're not talking to anybody else. They're completely and totally focused on how they can help you."

Tackling an Epidemic with Science and Support

To call addiction a public health crisis is, in some ways, understating the issue. Fueled by skyrocketing opiate use (including fentanyl), drugs, alcohol and nicotine have become the number one cause of preventable death in the world. In the United States, 750,000 die every year from these substances. In 2021, an average of four people in Minnesota died each day from a drug overdose. Beyond the numbers, addiction takes an enormous toll on families, communities, and our social and criminal justice systems.

As a healthcare provider with a mission to care for everyone, Hennepin Healthcare has found itself in the middle of this epidemic. Between 2008 and 2020, SUD-related hospital admissions at Hennepin Healthcare increased from 23 percent to 33 percent of total admissions.

For Addiction Medicine physician, Lauren Graber, MD, the sheer numbers show that we need to change the way we think about addiction.

"This is all of us, all of our coworkers, all of our friends, every neighborhood. This isn't just something that happens in the inner city, on the subway, or whatever the stereotype is," said Dr. Graber. "That's why I've taken this path, because diving in here is how we make the change in the world."

While some healthcare providers may turn away from what can seem like an



Part of the clinic team: Racquel McNeal, coordinator, Lauren Graber, MD, Jason Midgarden, RN and Maureen Martin, pharmacy resident.

insurmountable challenge, Hennepin Healthcare welcomes everyone who needs help, providing inpatient and emergency consultation as well as clinical services. At the Addiction Medicine Clinic in downtown Minneapolis, the waiting room is often filled with patients who come from around the metro area for weekly or monthly check-ins. Many patients receive addiction treatment medication, which can be extremely effective for opioid, alcohol and tobacco use disorders, but are often stigmatized by a dangerous double standard.

"People will have cancer, and they'll tell them, 'You need to go to the hospital. You need to get checked by a doctor,'" said Sundus. "You can have HIV, and they'll tell you, 'Go get some medicine.' This disease is just as deadly as all of those, but people just tell you to stop. They don't tell you, 'Go get the help that you need,' which is what is going to save your life."

In addition to medication, Hennepin Healthcare also provides individual counseling, drug and alcohol testing, and referrals to other medical and psychiatric services as needed. Clinic staff often connect people with outside resources to help with underlying issues, such as food or housing insecurity.

Hennepin Healthcare also plays an important role in expanding access to care through medical education and training, helping

advance understanding of SUDs and treatment options. This includes engagement through Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes), which provides addiction training to more than 1,000 providers across Minnesota and beyond.

No Stigma. No Judgment.

One of the greatest barriers to helping people with addiction is getting past the stigma that is often associated with the disease.

"We're in a country where people with drug problems tend to be disowned by their families," said Gavin Bart, MD, PhD, Hennepin Healthcare's Addiction Medicine Division Director. "The police arrest them and they end up in jail as a criminal justice problem. They lose their jobs. They lose their housing. To be honest, the healthcare system hasn't historically done a very good job taking care of people with addictions and treating them fairly."

Dr. Bart and his team are intent on a different approach, one focused on empathy and the creation of a "judgment free" zone. They understand every addiction story is different, and every individual deserves to feel safe and heard.

"There will never be another hospital that I go to that I feel I will get the respect that I get here," said Sundus. "To deal with the disease

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of addiction, we need humanity. We need respect. Because we don’t feel as if we have it. We feel shamed. We feel different. We feel like losers.”

Dr. Graber says these feelings are common, which is why it is critical to help patients know they are valued.

“Stigma is something that all of our patients walk in the door feeling,” she said. “It’s not only something they feel from other people, it’s also something that they feel within themselves. I feel like my job is making sure they know, ‘You are welcome here at any point, whether that be today, whether that be next week or next year, you have a place where you can be your wholehearted self.’”

Fighting Misperceptions, Finding Cures

Substance abuse disorders are shrouded in myth and misperception, which can prevent people from seeking the help they need. For 37-year-old Sarah Andrews, the stereotypes around addiction allowed her to hide her disease and kept her from getting treatment.

“I was very high-functioning. I had three businesses, three children, PTA meetings, soccer games,” said Sarah. “On the outside looking in, you would’ve never known I was addicted and struggling every single day with hard drug use.”

Sarah was born addicted to heroin and cocaine due to her mother’s drug use. She was in a medically induced coma for three weeks as a newborn. When she was 13, she started drinking regularly. Around 16 she started using drugs like methamphetamines. While at first it seemed like a social activity, things quickly turned.

“I knew the way that I used wasn’t normal,” said Sarah. “I could look around me and realize that nobody else was using the same way that I was using. At a certain point, it’s not about getting high anymore. It’s about not getting sick and it feels like survival.”

Sarah sought treatment, visiting a number of centers and trying a variety of therapies, but nothing seemed to work. At one point she started to believe she was destined to repeat the cycle of treatment and relapse over and over again. She lost custody of her children and felt like she was spiraling out of control.

“When you lose everything and you try to take your own life, you have literally no lower to go,” she said. “When there’s nothing else that can be taken from you, there’s nothing else you can destroy or give away or hurt yourself by doing... then grace is possible.”

Thankfully, Sarah’s story took a different turn when she tried a new medicinal treatment

called Sublocade®, a monthly injection aimed at curbing cravings for opiates. She said the injections, combined with the care she has received at Hennepin Healthcare, have been a game-changer for her recovery.

“I had tried many other clinics,” she said, “but the care that I found here, the love, the understanding, the compassion, the true interest in my recovery, has been unparalleled.”

For the Addiction Medicine care team, stories like Sarah’s show the promise and potential of the work they do.

Expanding Reach and Advancing Care

Unfortunately, the need for treatment is only getting more profound. Last year in Minnesota there were around 125,000 people with an untreated illicit drug use disorder, and around 250,000 people with untreated alcohol use disorder. Those numbers drive Dr. Bart to do more, to be sure every patient has a path to the treatment they need. This is also why the Hennepin Healthcare Foundation is working to establish an Endowed Chair for the Addiction Medicine Program, to provide funds that will improve access to care, support research, and help advocate for policies that address root causes of addiction.

“We’re the hospital that’s open 24/7,” said Dr. Bart. “We are the hospital that takes everyone, and we need to make sure that people who are struggling with substance use know that there’s a safe place for them to come. There’s so much need, and we need to be able to build that capacity.”

Saving Lives for Brighter Futures

While the addiction epidemic can be hard to wrap your arms around, the Clinic staff focus on making a difference one person at a time.

Sarah is building on the success of her treatment, holding down two jobs where she uses her own experience to help others facing addiction. She’s also on a path to regain custody of her kids, a goal that has been made possible by the medication she receives and support from her care team.

“It’s something that I can count on,” said Sarah. “It’s something that’s consistent. It’s

something that’s personally saved my life, and not just the care and compassion part, but there’s other pieces involved here. They have support services and resources. They make sure that you can find a meeting if you need one, or food if you don’t have any, or transportation if that’s a problem. The care comes from so many different angles.”

For Sundus, the personal attention from the clinic has helped her through some of her darkest times. During one particularly bad stretch after a relapse, Sundus went to a bridge with the intent of ending her life. As she sat on the railing listening to a song and getting ready to jump, she received a notification from her “MyChart” account. It was a message from her doctor telling her he was looking forward to seeing her at her appointment that week.

“At that point I had felt so alone, and so isolated, and so trapped, and so worthless, and useless, and unlovable,” she said, “that little message, ‘Can’t wait to see you,’ literally saved my life.”

Since then, Sundus has gotten back on track with her treatment and she has even referred friends to Hennepin Healthcare, telling them about the personalized care she has received.

“We might be addicts, and we might be a little rough on the edges, but when we’re in here, we’re kind to each other,” she said. “It’s mostly because of the environment we’re in. Because the people here are kind to us, we become kind to each other.”

The combination of science, empathy, and outreach has helped Hennepin Healthcare earn a reputation as a trusted resource for a population that has often had a hard time letting themselves feel vulnerable and trust others. While the numbers may say the addiction epidemic is only becoming more daunting, Hennepin Healthcare’s Addiction Medicine team refuses to give up, knowing each individual and each story offers hope for a healthier future.



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Sharing a light moment: Brian Grahan, MD, Sarah Andrews and Sarah Lexcen, PA.

