

## **Brunswick Uniting Church – 31 August 2014 : James Beckford Saunders**

When you hear the word overdose, what immediately springs to mind?

For me, it's one of the anti-drug adverts they used to show in the UK, where I grew up. It was a teenager slumped in a dirty toilet cubicle wearing ragged clothing, with sores all over his face and a syringe sticking out of his arm. It was accompanied by a dire warning that heroin 'screws you up'.

In short, it was a stereotype.

Leading up to Overdose Awareness Day, which is today, we've been looking at current facts and statistics relating to overdose, and I'd like to share a few with you:

- In 2012, the number of deaths from overdose exceeded the number of deaths in road accidents in both the UK and in Australia.
- Accidental overdose death rates in 2012 were higher in Australia's regional and rural areas than they were in capital cities.
- The number of middle-aged women dying from accidental overdose here in Australia has more than doubled in a decade. Women aged between 30 and 50 are now almost four times more likely to be found dead of an unintended overdose than in a crashed car.
- Nearly four Australians die every day from overdose.
- Prescription drugs are now more commonly involved in overdoses than illicit substances.

Clearly, these figures are telling us something. It's not just teenagers in dirty toilet cubicles using heroin who are dying from overdose. Overdose can happen to anyone; young, old, rich, poor, single, married, parents, grandparents. Overdose can happen to those who are educated, to nurses, to doctors. Overdose can happen when someone is happy or sad, whether they are well or unwell. It can happen to people using illicit substances, like heroin, or it can happen to people using over the counter and prescription drugs, and people using alcohol. In fact, overdose commonly happens when people are using a combination of substances. As a clinician said the other day, with drugs  $1 + 1 + 1 = 10$ . It's far more common than we are led to believe in the media.

And challenging the stereotypes and the stigma surrounding overdose can actually help prevent it.

I know some of you in this room are familiar with the heartbreak of overdose, whether in your work, a friend or family member, or as a survivor of overdose.

Isn't it strange that the way people die becomes the way we remember them? A split second decision (or lack of decision) becomes their legacy. We forget all the other things they have done with their lives. When people ask how a loved one died, you hesitate. If you say the word 'overdose' then you know what will happen. The shutters will come down. Their eyes will change. They will look uncomfortable. Conversation will falter. It compounds the grief of loss. You want to shout; 'they were so much more than their death!'

One mother who lost her son to overdose shared this with us:

*"How does it feel to lose someone to drugs? I think that society views drug addicted people to be of lesser intelligence. One of the hardest things that I have had to cope with is hearing people I know in my work place, or friends, talk about people who take drugs or have tattoos as being the lowest of the low. I know that my son was a loving, caring and very intelligent person. Certainly drugs and alcohol controlled part of his life but they didn't change the fundamental person that he was."*

Overdose is a devastating way to lose someone, because it is preventable. But it is not shameful. It should not be spoken about in whispers. It is no-one's fault. It is not a failure of love, support or parenting. It does not make the person a 'bad' person. They are not cowards. They are not failures. We can mourn their tragic loss, but still be proud of these people and all they achieved in their life.

The more we talk about it, the more we share information about how and why overdoses happen, the more we can stop it from happening. I'd like everyone in this room to commit to challenging their own internal stigma and stereotypes. The next time someone tells you they have lost a loved one to overdose, I want you to look them in the eye and say to them 'tell me about how they lived and why you loved them'. Let's work together to honour those who have died by doing our best to recognise overdose for what it is – a preventable accident. Talking about it can save lives.

**James Beckford Saunders – ReGen** <http://www.regen.org.au>