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**Lee Health Launches Initiative to Treat Opioid Addiction**

*Pilot Program Incorporates Medication-Assisted Treatment for Patients with Heart Infection*

(Fort Myers, Fla. – Feb. 4, 2019) – Lee Health is announcing a pilot program to treat opioid addiction and address the opioid crisis in Southwest Florida. The initiative includes implementing Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) for patients with endocarditis, a potential deadly heart infection.

The opioid crisis has induced a marked increase in endocarditis patients, a heart valve infection that often stems from intravenous drug use and results in multiple surgeries and hospitalizations.

Over the last two years, more than 8,000 inpatients were discharged with a substance abuse diagnosis other than alcohol or tobacco. Of these patients, nearly 340 were admitted with infective endocarditis for more than 6,000 total inpatient days and a 29.1 percent readmission rate. This is nearly double the health system's average readmission rate for all inpatients.

MAT is an evidence-based treatment that uses medication to block the effects of opioids and helps users effectively maintain sobriety and recovery. MAT works by activating opioid receptors in the brain to provide relief from withdrawals and cravings without providing the euphoria that comes from using opioids.

To make the program possible, hospitalists and emergency department doctors have applied for and received waivers to administer and prescribe buprenorphine, an opioid-like medication used to treat opioid addiction.

To date, a handful of patients has been entered into the pilot program which involves the following steps:

- 1) Treatment of the endocarditis infection
- 2) Voluntary enrollment by patients with substance use disorder, including signing a patient code of conduct agreement
- 3) Patient begins MAT treatment with closely-monitored doses of buprenorphine
- 4) Patients are seen weekly by the Licensed Clinical Social Worker from Spiritual Care Services for drug addiction counseling
- 5) Peer specialist support from individuals with personal experience in addiction recovery and are trained to support patients on their recovery journey. Lee Health is collaborating with its community partner Operation Par to arrange for these specialists

- 6) Upon discharge, patients will be given a prescription for continuing MAT and have the option of being transported to the outpatient community resource that will be providing their continuation of care

Brian Hummel, M.D., a cardiothoracic surgeon at Lee Health's Shipley Cardiothoracic Center convened an interdisciplinary team of caregivers to find a solution after seeing cases of endocarditis skyrocket. "I was alarmed by the number of patients returning to my care when they relapsed after trying standard addiction treatment. MAT has been proven to be the most effective treatment for opioid abuse, and we believe it will lead our patients to healthier lives," he said.

According to a [report](#) from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, MAT is the only viable treatment for opioid-addicted patients. Research shows the treatment reduces relapses, reduces risky behaviors that lead to other diseases, including HIV, and decreases the criminal behavior often associated with addiction.

"Detoxification and abstinence fail too often to be a viable option for people with substance use disorder. Opioid addiction is a disease, and we must treat it as we would any other disease, by using proven medical techniques and treatments to provide the most effective care for our patients," said Dr. Aaron Wohl, a Lee Health emergency department physician and advocate for addiction treatment reform.

"Our goal is to provide patients with the support they need through the entire recovery process. Through progressive MAT treatment, collaboration with our outpatient community partners and compassionate emotional support, we are confident we can continue to help lead Southwest Florida's response to the opioid crisis," said Dr. Hummel

#### **About Lee Health**

*Since the opening of the first hospital in 1916, Lee Health has been a health care leader in Southwest Florida, constantly evolving to meet the needs of the community. A non-profit, integrated health care services organization, Lee Health is committed to the well-being of every individual served, focused on healthy living and maintaining good health. Staffed by caring people, inspiring health, services are conveniently located throughout the community in four acute care hospitals, two specialty hospitals, outpatient centers, walk-in medical centers, primary care and specialty physician practices and other services across the continuum of care. Formerly known as Lee Memorial Health System, the organization began its second century of service with a new name in 2016. Learn more at [www.LeeHealth.org](http://www.LeeHealth.org).*