

Drugs, mental health, no access to care = South Lake Tahoe's key medical problems

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe has more people per capita dying from Alzheimer's compared to the nation. South Lake Tahoe's suicide rate is higher than California and the country's. More people smoke in South Lake Tahoe compared to the state.

Those were some of the stats dispersed to the South Lake Tahoe City Council on Feb. 19 by Barton Health officials.



In 2012, the South Lake Tahoe health organization completed a community health needs assessment. All nonprofit hospitals will be required to do these studies every three years as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in the health care reform

passed by Congress.

Nine main issues came up in the local study:

- Access to healthcare services
- Cancer
- Dementias, including Alzheimer's disease
- Housing
- Immunization and infectious diseases
- Injury and violence prevention

- Mental health and mental disorder
- Substance abuse
- Tobacco use.

While Barton will address all of them, the three that will be the main focus are substance abuse, access to care and mental health.

Drug use in South Tahoe on a per capita basis is about four times what it is nationally.

“The study reaffirms what we are seeing in the emergency room,” Cline Purvance, Barton’s chief medical officer, told the council. “This started in the late 1990s when pain became the fifth vital sign. Assessing and treating pain became a big priority. We have swung too far.”

He said it’s time health care providers look at what they are doing. With online medical records becoming a reality, medical personnel will better be able to know who has prescribed what for each patient.

In addition to prescription drugs being a problem, marijuana, heroin, opiates, synthetic drugs and alcohol are all local issues.

The report shows a steady trend of local drug-induced deaths since 1999.

There is also a high rate of suicides in this area.

Health officials recognize drugs-mental illness-lack of health care can be tied together.

A psychiatrist was added to the payroll last year. And when the community clinic’s expansion is done this summer a psychologist will be hired.

Police Chief Brian Uhler said his officers see the drug and

mental health issues every day. He pointed out how the area does not have a long-term care facility for those with mental issues.

More information about the report may be found online.