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## Town and Country Hospital's addiction unit a rarity

By Nicole Hutcheson, Times Staff Writer

*A Lakeland woman finds help for her addiction at Town and Country.*

TOWN 'N COUNTRY - Leslie Yount realized her addiction when she started "doctor shopping" during lunch breaks from her job as a 10th-grade reading teacher.

But it wasn't until she got high, stumbled and dropped her baby that Yount was forced to confront her problem.

"You've got to stop or I'm taking our son," her husband told her.

Her response: Go, but leave the drugs.

Instead he searched for help on the Internet and found a savior miles away from their Lakeland home at Town and Country Hospital - the only remaining hospital in the Tampa Bay area with an alcohol and drug recovery unit.

Although opinions vary, some experts say hospitals possess some of the best resources to deal with detoxifying addicts and the underlying health issues that accompany their drug use.

About 80 percent of people with a drug addiction also suffer from mental illness, said Dr. Michael Cromer, medical director for Town and Country's detox program. And many who take drugs are dealing with chronic illnesses such as diabetes or heart disease. By treating them in a hospital, tackling their other medical conditions is a more seamless process.

"It's a way to be more closely monitored and managed," Cromer said. "We take care of the most severe and sickest patients. As a result we get calls from all over the U.S."

The program was even featured recently on the A&E series *Intervention*, where families confront addicted relatives. A young Florida woman named Amber had gone there for treatment.

Yet, in the past decade as prescription drug abuse has skyrocketed, hospitals have gotten out of the business of drug rehabilitation.

Now just 25 hospitals statewide offer alcohol and drug recovery for people like Yount, according to the Florida Hospital Association.

A decade ago, Cromer said, that number was significantly higher.

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Several high-profile raids of Tampa Bay area pain clinics in recent months have shed light on the severity of prescription drug abuse. Yount, who lives in Lakeland, said that as long as she could pay, she obtained drugs from clinics and doctors who wrote her prescriptions.

"Once they're addicted they can't come off because of the physical withdrawal symptoms," Cromer said.

In the 1990s, Cromer would see about 300 patients a year at Town and Country with prescription drug abuse addictions. Now the patient number is more like 1,000, he said.

After being admitted to the 16-bed unit at Town and Country Hospital, patients suffering from pain pill addiction receive Suboxone, a crossover drug that helps them cope with withdrawal. If they show signs of anxiety, they can also be prescribed antidepressants.

Once stabilized, they are required to take part in the educational program, which can mean up to four counseling sessions a day.

"A lot of people just want to sleep this off, but that's not going to help them stay clean," Cromer said.

The classes range from how to cope with relationship triggers to the history of pharmacology.

"We want to raise their awareness about how the brain becomes addicted in the first place," said Gene Cowherd, the hospital's coordinator of counseling. "And then ultimately for them to get their brains back to a state of ease."

They also talk about the issues that led them to drug abuse in the first place.

For Yount, 30, it was the diagnosis of early onset osteoporosis. Typically a disease found in older women, Yount was diagnosed at 22.

"Imagine being kicked in the shin and multiply it by 100," she said describing the pain associated with the condition. "I couldn't do anything anymore, my life stopped."

It was mentally taxing as well.

"To find out you have an old lady disease," she said. "I lost a lot of who I thought I was as a person."

In 2002, a doctor prescribed Oxycontin for the pain. Yount, who was pursuing a master's degree at the University of Central Florida at the time, said the drug worked at first. But within months, Yount said, Oxycontin's effectiveness wore off. Her doctor prescribed Vicodin.

Within a year, Yount was addicted. Not taking the drugs meant muscle cramps, diarrhea, sweats, shakes and nausea, she said.

"The euphoric feeling also became addictive," she said.

Yount began her day with a handful of pills, then taught at a school in Orlando. At lunchtime, she slapped a Fentanyl medicine patch on her arm and popped another pill. When class was dismissed, she would get in her car and start doctor shopping.

After two years of taking pills, Yount began chewing up and sucking on the Fentanyl patches - a practice that she'd learned about in online forums about drug use.

In 2007, she lost her teaching job. A brief sober period came with the birth of her son in 2008, but soon Yount returned to the pills.

"I didn't want to do anything but get drugs," she recalled of that time.

She chose Town and Country's detox program because of the teaching element.

"They introduce you to 12-step meetings," she said. "So, it's not just sitting around playing with your laptop."

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Reasons for the decline in hospital programs like Town and Country's vary.

Some addiction professionals point to the high cost of treatment in a private setting, as opposed to community-based programs, many of which are sponsored by organizations and subsidized by the government. Town and Country's program costs about \$2,750 for a five-day opiate detox. Some insurance plans offset the cost.

"We found out you really don't need to treat people with alcohol and drug problems in a medical setting," said Gerry Schmidt, Clinical Affairs consultant for the Association for Addiction Professionals. "And most people facing this kind of problem can't afford that kind of care."

Others disagree, saying that more programs like Town and Country's are needed.

"For alcohol, benzodiazepine it's a medical necessity," said Louise Wallowitz, clinical director at Hyde Park Counseling Center. "The body is physically dependent and the withdrawal is severe enough that it can be fatal."

After the program, Yount was referred to Wallowitz who holds weekly counseling sessions with her. Yount has been sober for a year now, she said. She does physical therapy and takes Boniva to manage her osteoporosis.

Her pain is minimal.

"Our body has the ability to adjust to the pain level," she said.

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Fast facts

Last of its kind

Town and Country Hospital Alcohol and Drug Recovery Center is located at 6001 Webb Road. For more information, call 1-866-933-3869.

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