Addiction Expert: Treatment Providers Can Perpetuate Media Stereotypes of Patients

Stereotypes about addiction, perpetuated by the media, can be unintentionally reinforced by addiction professionals, according to a New York addiction expert.

"When you go to a diabetes clinic, you don't expect your doctor to have diabetes. But many people treating those who are addicted have themselves been treated for addiction, and tend to use the same lingo as their patients to make them feel more comfortable," Dr. Edwin A. Salsitz, MD, Medical Director, Office-Based Opioid Therapy at Beth Israel Medical Center, said at a recent meeting, "Solutions to the Addiction Crisis." "They use terms like 'dirty' or 'clean' to refer to a urine drug test, instead of the more medical 'positive' or 'negative.' Using slang in addiction medicine can be confusing and demeaning, and reinforce the stigma attached to addiction."

Salsitz encourages his colleagues to choose their words carefully. "We need to use medical terms for addiction medicine," he said. "I never use the word 'addict'—that pigeonholes someone, and defines who they are. I always talk about addicted patients."

Addiction professionals' use of language can unintentionally reinforce how the media portrays addiction and people struggling with it, he said.

He noted the media uses the terms "addict," "addiction" or "junkie" lightly, and gave examples from newspaper headlines that used terms such as "yoga addict" and "beauty addict." He also pointed to ads for the fragrance called Dior Addict. Sometimes the word "addictive" is used in a positive way, such as the phrase "lusciously addictive," to portray something that is appealing, he noted. "Using these terms lightly makes it seem that addiction is not a serious disease," he added. "When I see the trivializing of this terminology, it offends me."

When the media portrays people struggling with addiction in a negative light, it is not considered politically incorrect, and there is no widespread objection, Salsitz argued. He gave examples of jokes about methadone clinics made on two recent episodes of "Saturday Night Live," and a joke Amy Poehler made about pills at the recent Golden Globes Awards. Late-night hosts Jay Leno and Jimmy Kimmel have made jokes about junkies and addicts, he said. "These jokes aren't made out

of maliciousness, they're made out of ignorance, and no one objects. But they are hurtful to patients and their families."