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Price is high, but so is promise of new ice addiction therapy

By Mike Gordon
Advertiser Staff Writer

A new O'ahu treatment center for substance abuse began promoting an expensive new therapy for ice addiction yesterday that some doctors say could be a cure for one of the state's biggest problems.

The therapy — called the Prometa protocol — combines nutritional supplements and several Food and Drug Administration-approved medications to reduce the physical cravings and anxiety experienced by recovering crystal methamphetamine addicts. It also works on cocaine and alcohol abuse.

But the cost is high: \$10,000 to \$15,000 for a five-day treatment program that isn't covered yet by insurance, said James Dorsey, managing director for Island Recovery Centers, the only Hawai'i organization currently licensed by its creators, Hythiam Inc., to use the program.

Dorsey hopes to raise \$300,000 in private donations and funnel it to the Ko'olauloa Community Health and Wellness Center in Kahuku as early as this summer. The center would have to provide matching funds, he said.

"We'd like to have this program in our community," said Dr. Miriam Chang, medical director for the center. "There are ice problems everywhere, but we have it in a big way. I have friends whose kids are on ice."

While FDA approval of the treatment system is not required, Prometa's creators supported several unrestricted grants and pilot programs to test its effectiveness.

Results of the first clinical study were announced Wednesday by Research Across America, which found that 97 percent of the patients experienced a reduction in cravings for ice and 80 percent of them reported reduced drug use.

Yesterday, drug court officials in Pierce County, Wash., joined counterparts in Gary, Ind., in adopting Prometa as an option for criminal drug offenders. More than 92 percent of the 40 participants in the Pierce County pilot program remained drug free during their monitoring period.

The strictest study — a double-blind placebo study led by UCLA's Integrated Substance Abuse Program — is still being conducted.

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When Hythiam announced in March that Island Recovery Centers had been licensed to use its program — one of 40 nationwide — Lt. Gov. James R. "Duke" Aiona praised the effort. The former drug court judge called it "an exciting new treatment option."

But no Hawai'i Drug Court representatives were invited to a briefing that Island Recovery Centers gave yesterday to about 30 substance abuse treatment providers, interested citizens and state officials.

"Hawai'i Drug Court officials are always willing to look at new methods and products that may help with the clients' recovery," said Marsha Kitagawa, a spokeswoman for the state judiciary. "However, at this time, Hawai'i Drug Court officials are not considering the use of Prometa primarily because no one has contacted them about the new drug."

Other experts in the drug treatment community are taking a cautious approach.

"This is an opportunity to look at something new," said Keith Yamamoto, chief of the state Department of Health's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division. "We are not endorsing anything at this point. We need to see what the clinical trials results look like."

Alan Johnson, chief operating officer and managing director for Hina Mauka, said Prometa is still "fairly experimental."

"I think all of us in the field are anxious to see medication and support to help reduce the craving out there," Johnson said. "But we are waiting for it to be embraced by the whole medical community with solid research behind it. And we are concerned about any long-term effects of the drug."

The largest treatment center in the state, Hina Mauka's nine-month program has an 80 percent success rate, which is far higher than the national rate of 50 percent to 55 percent, Johnson said.

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