

**Testimony of Elizabeth Deutsch RN before the
Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention
Albany Hearing, November 15, 2019**

My name is Elizabeth Deutsch, and I am nurse with twenty-two years of clinical experience. I have spent most of my career in emergency medicine and critical care. During that time I have treated many people who use drugs. I have watched as people dropped their friends I have seen overdose victims abandoned at the door of the emergency room. After once hearing someone yell, "there are two dead guys in the parking lot," I had to go from car to car trying to find the people who had overdosed outside of the hospital. I have sat with parents who are waiting to find out if their children can become organ donors after an overdose has left them brain dead, so that something positive could come out their nightmare experience. I have been present as an administrator while social workers take babies from mothers who use drugs hours after birth even though the research and science shows that this practice is more harmful to the baby. Newborns who are kept with their mothers after birth show statistically better outcomes than those who are separated.

These people are casualties of our opioid epidemic, and the tragedy is compounded by stigma. This is what stigma and antiquated thinking has done to people who use drugs. It has left them sick and vulnerable with out the treatment that research shows is the best practice.

We can change the stories that nurses like me will tell in the future. We can open Overdose Prevention Centers and save lives today. We can start to remove the stigma that people who use drugs face everyday. We can follow evidenced based best practice and begin to really fight Substance Use Disorder instead of the person who has as a disorder. Imagine if we treated smokers who have COPD or Lung Cancer the way we treat people who use drugs? Imagine if we took the children who live in a house where a parent smokes from their parent and placed them in foster care for the risk smoking poses to that child's health? Or with held oxygen and other treatments from the smoker until they stopped smoking? We would never do that, yet we do the equivalent everyday to people who are struggling.

One out of every ten people who are given a prescription for opiates after surgery will never get off them. Should we doom these people to a life of shame, danger, and possible death because of our lack of courage to follow the research guidelines that show clearly that OPCs and low threshold Buprenorphine saves lives. OPCs are in place in 150 cities around the world. In all of those centers, not one person has ever died from an overdose. They offer people who use drugs a safe place to use and healthcare workers who can save their lives if something goes wrong. They also increase the likelihood that people will go into treatment. They help people move away from chaotic drug use and change their lives. This is what harm reduction means, that we stop allowing stigma and prejudice to cloud the way we treat a disease.