

# Breaking the cycle

Doctors highlight lingering effects of childhood trauma, mental illness

BY NATHAN J. COMP

**The calculus is simple:** children with untreated mental illness are more likely to fill prison cells, drug treatment beds and homeless shelters as adults.

“Most adult mental health problems begin before the age of 18,” says Dr. Doug Kramer, a semi-retired child psychiatrist in Madison. “You’d think the national imperative would focus on children, but it doesn’t.”

Several years into his retirement from UW-Health, Kramer is continuing his life’s work helping children and teens overcome the stigmas and symptoms of mental disorders, the leading cause of disability in young people, according to the World Health Organization.

On Sept. 19, Kramer, 72, joined forces with Dr. Andrés Martin, director of Yale University’s Child Study Center, to help raise money for Break the Cycle, a nonprofit Martin founded last year to help draw attention to what he describes as a “huge public health mess.”

Martin is biking from Seattle to Washington, D.C., to raise money and awareness for children’s mental health. Kramer joined him on the Madison to Milwaukee stretch of the ride.

“We really need to deal with this,” says Martin, who is also editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Childhood and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

“Stigmas around mental illness are still pervasive,” Martin adds. “We’ve made some strides, but not nearly enough.”

Kramer, a former president of the academy’s Wisconsin chapter, says few, if any, are unaffected by untreated mental illness



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in children. For example, the current heroin epidemic, he suspects, has been fueled by childhood traumas that were untreated.

“I would guess as much as 90 percent of heroin addicts come from childhood abuse,” he says. “As adolescents and young adults, they discover that drugs, especially heroin, numb their symptoms.”

According to the World Health Organization, half of all mental illnesses begin by the age of 14 and are the leading cause of disabil-

ity in young people. The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health has found that an estimated 1 in 5 U.S. children — more than 10 million — suffer from a debilitating mental health disorder. But treatment doesn’t necessarily equal help. As practices have become more specialized, the care has gotten spottier. Kramer says, “It’s ruining medicine.”

“When I was in medical school, we talked about treating the whole patient,” he says. “Now we have doctors that operate on just the

right knee; they couldn’t care less about the rest of the body.”

Mental health is no exception.

“Psychiatrists aren’t asking why their patients have these symptoms,” he continues. “You need to know about the school, the neighborhood, the family economic status to adequately know what’s going on.”

This may be changing. Earlier this month, the state Department of Health and Human Services announced its goal of making Wisconsin the first “trauma-informed” state. Since 2012, 43 counties and three tribes have participated in the Wisconsin Trauma Project, which found that 53 percent of Wisconsin residents had at least one “adverse childhood experience” increasing the likelihood they’ll suffer — or have already suffered — from a serious mental disorder.

An estimated 14 percent reported four or more adverse childhood experiences, doubling the risk of stress-related heart disease and increasing the risk of attempted suicide by 1,200 percent, according to state figures.

Martin anticipated raising between \$20,000 and \$30,000 over the course of his two-month ride. By the time he and Kramer reached Milwaukee, Break the Cycle had raised more than \$165,000.

As for the ride?

“I did it,” Kramer wrote in an email after his 90-mile ride to Milwaukee. “The best part of the whole experience were all the wonderful people who truly care about our children, and who understand the depth of the current problem with respect to children’s mental illnesses.” ■