

From Prescription to Addiction: A Sister's Journey

Although she has never lived with addiction, Rita has witnessed the long and painful journey associated with opioid misuse. At the age of sixteen, Rita's sister, Natalie, was given prescriptions for sixty 10mg/325 Percocets® and sixty 2mg Xanax® for knee pain and anxiety. This was the standard of care, and in many places it still is. That day marked the beginning of Natalie's long battle with substance use disorder.

In order to satisfy the physical dependence that she developed, Natalie continued to approach her providers with symptoms that would warrant a prescription for opioids and/or benzodiazepines. Rita knew something was wrong in the early years. She wanted her parents to talk to Natalie, but the stigma surrounding addiction was too big a hurdle for them to do so. In addition to the mixture of opioids and benzodiazepines she was receiving, Natalie's psychiatrist prescribed her Adderall. She enjoyed the stimulant's euphoric effects - a potential sign of her future use of methamphetamine. After eight years of cycling through prescriptions, Natalie's physicians discontinued treatment and refused to prescribe any more medications.

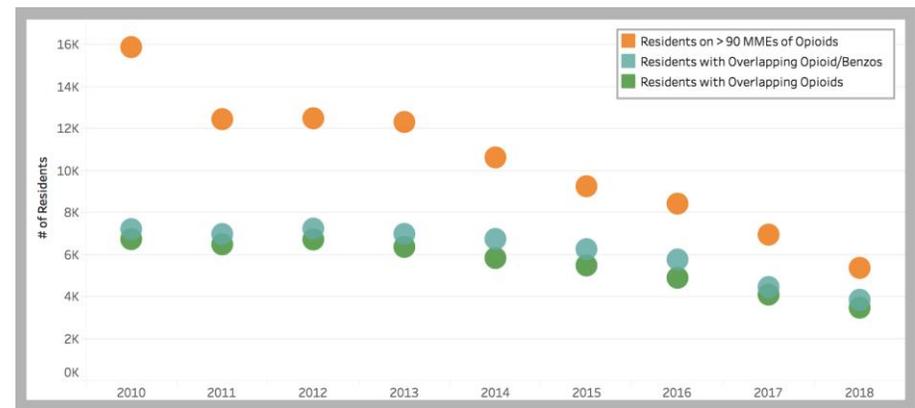


Rita on the left and Natalie on the right



Rita today

Certain prescription drug combinations and dosages, like Natalie's overlapping benzodiazepine/opioid prescriptions, constitute a high-risk for overdose and/or substance misuse. This graph marks a decrease in the number of high-risk patients in Santa Cruz County - possibly a result of safer prescribing protocols.





Rita on the left and Natalie on the right

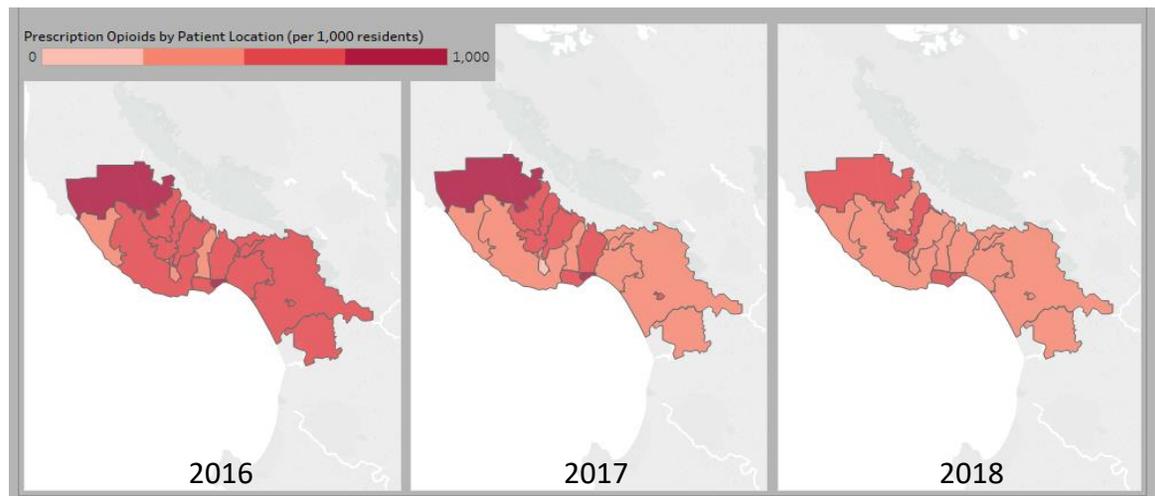


Rita today

With no physician prescribing Natalie opioids, she started to use heroin - the answer to her cravings. Her use of methamphetamine quickly followed. As a means to pay for her addiction she resorted to theft and even stole from her sister, Rita. She became homeless, went through a divorce, and severed family ties. Natalie's repeated acts of theft have left her with an extensive criminal record, and she is currently serving five years in prison.

Over the course of her life, Rita learned to move forward amidst the heartbreak. Her sister's addiction has had a lasting influence on her life's path. Rita made the decision to pursue a masters in public health as a way to get involved with upstream prevention of substance use disorders. Rita is an advocate for individuals that live with addiction. She is driven to engage with work that is aimed at curbing the opioid epidemic so others don't have to experience the grief and trauma that she went through.

Rita's work directly combats unsafe prescribing methods. Below are the prescribing trends in Santa Cruz County by zip code. In 2016, some areas had about **9 opioid prescriptions per 10 residents** – there has been slow, yet steady improvement ever since.



For more information, you can visit SafeRx Santa Cruz County's website at www.hipscc.org/saferrx or email rita@hipscc.org