

## To improve addiction treatment, rate the providers

Gary Mendell, Opinion contributor Published 6:00 a.m. ET Dec. 18, 2018

*My son died at 25. My organization is working to make better information available to desperate families.*



When my son was prescribed medication to treat his opioid addiction, I felt like I got him back. It was incredible. The light returned to his eyes; there was levity back in his voice. “Dad,” he gushed, “I feel great.”

Brian had finally been offered a highly effective, Food and Drug Administration-approved [medication](#) in his seventh addiction treatment program. His seventh. That meant none of the six previous programs was following proven research on how to most effectively treat addiction. But I hadn’t known this.

With Brian thriving on his medication, things were looking up for my family. I gave myself permission to think of Brian’s future: a fulfilling career, a loving family and a home of his own. But these dreams were shattered when my son’s new psychiatrist stopped his medication, explaining he didn’t believe in it. Months later, Brian was dead at age 25.

My family and I felt so alone throughout Brian’s struggles. But now, I realize our experience is sadly all too common. More than [20 million Americans](#) have substance use disorders. Around [90,000 Americans](#) die each year because of alcohol misuse, and last year alone [70,237 people](#) died from drug overdoses. In fact, overdoses now [kill more](#) Americans than gun violence, car crashes and even breast cancer.

All those families, every year. Shattered.

Addiction is a treatable disease with success rates comparable to other chronic illnesses. But the treatment system for addiction is broken, fragmented and centered on outdated models. Only [one in 10 Americans](#) with a substance use disorder receives any treatment at all — and far fewer receive treatment based on proven research.

## **Desperate families need credible information**

This is unacceptable. Access to legitimate addiction treatment shouldn't be a roll of the dice depending on where you live, what kind of insurance you have or what hotline you happened to call for help. That's why I founded Shatterproof, a nonprofit organization focused on ensuring that every American with a substance use disorder has access to treatment based upon proven research, without being judged or stigmatized, just like those receiving treatment for any other disease.

Several key tactics would drive significant change in this area. One is a rating system that assesses treatment providers based on a set of established criteria, and then makes those assessments available to consumers and insurers.

The last time you made a large purchase, you probably consulted consumer reviews before making your decision. And before dining out, you likely scoured online menus and read diners' reviews. This kind of research helps consumers evaluate costs and benefits and avoid disappointing experiences. So, when it comes to something as critical as seeking lifesaving addiction care for a loved one in urgent need, why do we have no way to properly assess treatment providers?

For decades, our health care industry has used measurement systems to drive improvements in patient outcomes and reduce costs. It's time to bring this common-sense approach to addiction treatment and save lives.

## **We're starting a new rating system**

Shatterproof's new rating system, a \$5 million project being announced today, will measure treatment providers based on a few key criteria: the program's adherence to well-established best practices, patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes. We'll then take that information and make it available to consumers, providers and insurers.

This system will equip desperate families with trustworthy information and drive provider accountability, while giving health insurers the information they need to support the best care. We plan to pilot the system in five states and roll it out nationally in 2021.

Other ways to improve addiction treatment include better training for treatment providers, reforming insurance payment systems, and ending the judgment and stigma associated with those afflicted with this disease.

With more information and better options, my son might still be alive. Wasting more time and resources on ineffective approaches will result in more needless deaths, more families shattered. It's time to take the fear and uncertainty out of the addiction treatment system and invest in what has been proven to improve patient outcomes.

*Gary Mendell is the founder and CEO of [Shatterproof](#), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing the devastation addiction causes families.*