



## BEA's Advisory Board Member and Addiction Specialist, Gregg Scharf:

I am a Clinical Substance Abuse Counselor, and I am reaching out in regards to the DEA's efforts to push a ban on two active alkaloids that are present in the plant known as Kratom. I understand there is a lot of concern recently over this plant, however, there is also a lot of misinformation regarding this plant too. I specialize in opiate misuse treatment. I graduated with a master's degree in mental health counseling from Viterbo University. I have been working in the Medically-Assisted Treatment field for almost three years and have significant experience helping people end their opiate addiction and heal the extensive damage that occurs cognitively from extended opiate misuse. I am also very adept at working with methamphetamine addiction which this specialized area is still very much in its infancy yet.

Many people I have spoken to over the last couple years report that Kratom has been very helpful in alleviating symptoms of withdrawal from their opioid medications when they stop wanting to take these narcotics and retain their former quality of life. Of course this plant became something of interest to me and over the last two years I began doing some research and spoke with hundreds of people about how this plant works for them and what their experiences are regarding Kratom. I have learned that if you take too much you will feel very sick and ultimately you may even throw up. I believe the knowledge that this plant can help with opiate treatment has caused many, many people to seek it out and use it as a home remedy. I also think that not everyone does their research about this plant and if used improperly there could be fear enough to call 911 and ask for help- hence the increase in CDC poison control calls in the last few years regarding Kratom. This is where regulation is needed and can help protect and inform the public on proper kratom consumption.

Kratom was banned in Wisconsin, when misinformation was at its highest, so I have had no contact with the substance. I suspect many people in the DEA have as much personal experience with this plant as I, but why is it that an addiction expert and a government entity have such opposing views on this topic? Deep down I just don't see how banning more plants is going to help in the opioid epidemic. Also, if this leaf works as many people say that it does, I believe banning Kratom would actually increase the likelihood of people using heroin when the DEA cuts off the opioid supply in 2017 due to changing regulation. I truly believe that banning Kratom will have a direct impact on increasing overdose death rates if this plant is able to ease people from resorting to opiates and/or heroin use.

As a clinician, I also encourage you to look at this issue from a clinical perspective, and if you are not sure what that means I can explain. First, it is important to understand what defines substance abuse and how it impacts a person's life. If you can't control your use, and begin to spend more time participating in drug seeking activities, and lose touch with what is important to you (job, family, self-care) then you have a substance misuse issue. An avid opioid user cares for nothing other than their drug, and the thought of getting and using their drug is what fills their thoughts every waking minute of their day. People who use heroin or other opioids are likely to spend a great deal of money to fuel their habit. They are likely to commit crimes and ultimately



put their lives at risk of death. Heroin and other opioid pills are what killed nearly 40,000 people in 2014 due to overdose.

The Kratom community appears to be a very different population of people. We see a lot of people talking about wanting a quality life back, and seeking to be active in their communities, families, and their personal pursuits. We see people who have taken the reigns of health back in order to deal with a great many symptoms that may have prohibited their former quality of life. They are unwilling to accept that powerful narcotics are the only answer, and that difference in thinking is incredibly important. People who use a plant to engage and participate in life in a functional and positive way are not the people taking great risks with their health. This is a dramatic difference in lifestyle choices and overall outlook towards life and life's possibilities.

I want to close by reiterating that the typical person who uses Kratom is someone with a family, job, education, a desire for quality of life, and goals for their future. Someone trapped in addiction is typically silent in their struggle, disconnected, hopeless, and even suicidal. The question that must be asked is what does the Kratom community appear to be like to you? When you see the efforts being made by hundreds of thousands of people fighting for Kratom, does it resemble strung out behavior? The answer is "No" it doesn't, because they are two very separate populations and only one of them needs any help.