

Battling Addiction

By Charles Eichacker

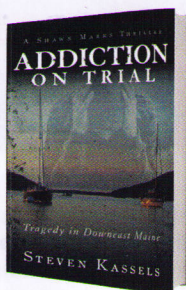
Two New England governors recently used their State of the State addresses to draw attention to the same issue: a surge in opiate drug abuse in their respective states. But while Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin framed heroin addiction as a public health issue and asked the Green Mountain State Legislature to fund more treatment programs, Maine Governor Paul LePage presented Maine's "troubling epidemic" as a legal matter.

"We are losing the war on drugs," LePage said, before proposing to hire 22 new law enforcement officials — four prosecutors, four judges and 14 Maine Drug Enforcement Agency officers — who would specifically target drug distributors

and abusers.

In conclusion, LePage said, "We must hunt down dealers and get them off the streets. We must protect our citizens from drug-related crimes and violence."

Last December, shortly before those two governors gave their speeches, Steven Kassels' new novel about drug abuse, "Addiction On Trial: Tragedy in Downeast Maine," came out. But if Kassels' title makes his work sound like something out of LePage's rhetorical



war chest, the first-time fiction writer's message is closer to Shumlin's.

Kassels splits his time between Boston and Southwest Harbor. A former emergency room doctor who now serves as medical director of a group called

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Community Substance Abuse Centers that operate drug treatment clinics across New England, he first conceived of "Addiction on Trial" six years ago as a way to destigmatize drug addiction.

The novel, which Kassels describes as a "medical murder mystery/legal thriller," features several characters who come from or live in the fictional Mount Desert Island town of West Haven Harbor. Jimmy Sedgewick, a transplant, is charged with murder after a girl, whose boyfriend is out on an extended scallop fishing trip, is found dead in



a ditch. At the novel's outset, all three of

those characters are into drugs: heroin, OxyContin, cocaine.

The thrills commence as Sedgewick's widower dad Adam — like Kassels, an emergency room physician — travels to Maine from Kansas City and hires a big shot Boston attorney to defend his son; he can't believe Jimmy committed the murder.

Recognizing that many readers wouldn't be interesting in picking up "a dry, scientific book about addiction," Kassels said, "I wanted to educate them about it through the back door. If I

wrote it as a medical mystery, it would give them the chance to fully understand the life of an addict."

To get his medical points across, Kassels relies on characters like Saul Tolson, a psychotherapist who at one point argues for thinking of addiction, like diabetes, as a chronic disease. We also hear the thoughts of characters like the scallop fisherman, Travis Bomer, who wants to quit opiates but can't bring himself to make the two-hour drive to the nearest methadone clinic in Bangor every day, particularly when he's heard that the clinic is full.

The problem, Kassels said, is the "NIMBY" — not in my backyard — attitude people take toward drug addicts, who they can't believe live

in their community; that attitude makes people resist the placement of methadone centers in town and believe that opiate addiction will disappear when the dealers are locked up.

Kassels hopes LePage will read his book, because when it costs upward of \$60,000 to incarcerate someone for a year, versus about \$3,000 for the state to pay for one person's counseling and methadone treatment in that same amount of time, he said, "you don't have to be a rocket scientist" to see which option is more cost-effective.

Kassels will be on Mount Desert Island this summer to talk about his book. For the dates and locations of those engagements, visit www.addictionontrial.com.

Doctor Explores 'NIMBY' Attitude to Treatment Centers

