

A New Year, Overdose Deaths still in the Headlines

We start the New Year by once again looking at the tragic reality of overdose deaths in America. While we await 2023 data let's recall the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released reports this past summer showing that the year over year 12 month reporting periods continued to show an escalation in fatalities from overdoses. During the 12 month period ending December 2022, overdose deaths rose to 109,680, setting yet another devastating annual record. This after a glimmer of hope with rates starting to level off and decrease in 2018 and 2019. This progress was short lived with the onset of COVID 19 when increased and prolonged isolation contributed to a spike in overdose deaths after some progress occurred, albeit with mind blowing death numbers still at more than 100,000 annually.

We are now living with the reality that 301 people every day die of an overdose death in this country. There is a sense that folk are becoming numb to the news. There is increasing pressure in New York for the Governor to declare the opioid crisis a public health emergency as a handful of other state have done. This request is expected to be a central theme in this year's addiction Recovery Advocacy Day activities in Albany on February 13, 2024. Just a few weeks ago, Governor Hochul shared data indicating 6,393 died in NY in 2022 representing a 73% increase over a 3 year period. To add additional context, in 2010 there were 1,074 deaths and in 2020 4,233. Furthermore a 2022 report from NY State Comptroller revealed that substance use disorders are rising at an alarming rate and many are more complex than before as 85% are accompanied by a co-occurring mental health condition as well. Our present day reality is that 19 people a day die of an overdose in NY State!

Just prior to COVID 19 researchers shared that for the first time in modern memory life expectancy for the average American decreased after gradually increasing consistently over decades. The primary contributing factor to the downturn was the skyrocketing level of overdose deaths. This alarming fact predated COVID and only became worse when compounded by the COVID death toll numbers.

Over the last few of years we also witnessed the emergence of a previously unknown drug Xylazine, being used as an adulterant, (like deadly fentanyl). Xylazine is a tranquilizer used for anesthesia, sedation, muscle relaxation and analgesia (pain relief) in horses, cattle and other animals. It has unknown properties that can result in "flesh eating" side effects that have resulted in amputation in some instances. According to the Guardian news agency, Xylazine is infamous for causing severe flesh wounds that can lead to the need for amputation. Xylazine is not an opiate which means that naloxone will not reverse an overdose however the administration will not cause any harm and may still save a life if there is fentanyl or other opiates involved in the drug mixture which is common place.

Harm reduction proponents continue to urge drug users to never use alone, or if using together not to do so at the same time, taking turns in the interest of safety. In addition everyone in this high risk group should carry naloxone, fentanyl test strips and those for Xylazine too.

The New York City non-profit OnPointNYC, opened the country's first two (safe injection sites-SIS), sanctioned overdose prevention centers – locations approved by authorities where people can inject in a clean, supervised setting without fear of getting arrested. Reporting from several months ago showed that since opening in 2021, OnPoint's sites had been used almost 70,000 times, during which staff intervened in just under 850 overdoses (about 1.2%) 65% of those "heavily adulterated with fentanyl," says Kailin See, the non-profit's director of programming. Because of how closely they supervise people, OnPoint has only had to call an ambulance 14 times, and nobody who has overdosed there has died.

Because it's publicly approved, OnPoint is able to work with the city's health department to track Xylazine rates in the city and a significant, increased presence has been noted.

In a positive development the United States was able to enlist the cooperation of the Chinese government who recently made a commitment to help crack down on the movement of fentanyl from China to North America but it remains unclear how soon we will see the benefits of these joint efforts.

Other SIS have opened in relative secrecy in upstate New York and other areas and are said to be serving a significant number of injection drug users. Harm reduction strategies continue to gain support (Widespread availability of Naloxone the opioid overdose reversal drug, needle exchange programs and fentanyl testing strips) while the acceptance of other controversial strategies has been much slower including the aforementioned safe injection sites despite evidence to date appearing to be indisputable.

Prior to the NYC openings, these safe injection sites (90 known worldwide), have been around for some time in other countries, most notably in Vancouver, Canada where the Insight Program opened in 2003 at last report (>5 years ago) they had over 3.1 million injection drug use episodes and despite tens of thousands of overdoses, not been a single death. A publication from the College of Family Physicians in Canada indicates that SISs are associated with lower overdose mortality (88 fewer deaths per 100 000 person-years [PYs]), 67% fewer ambulance calls for treating overdoses, and a decrease in HIV infections.

SIS facilities and other measures may not have wide support in ordinary times yet have gained momentum as a result of the explosion in deaths attributed to fentanyl and the desire to "keep people alive long enough for them to find recovery". Overall, harm reduction methods have helped but not nearly enough, evidenced by the increased rate of deaths again in 2022. Advocates continue to press forward with harm reduction measures reminding others that "people can't recover if they're dead."

Increased anecdotal reporting indicates the criminal underground has been busy over the past few years experimenting with other synthetic materials (a fentanyl workaround) and analogs to create new and perhaps even more dangerous variations of these drugs. These practices first caught the attention of law enforcement officials several years ago with the rise in these synthetic substances which were initially labeled and grouped together under a banner called "bath salts">these unregulated substances were easily accessible and available for sale in "head shops" gas stations and other 24 hour convenience stores. It remains extremely risky to use any kind of powder or pill form of illicit drugs these days.

Advocates are working feverishly on new tools to combat overdose deaths including wearable electronic devices that can detect fentanyl or other signs of an overdose and automatically release a dose of naloxone into the system to fend off an overdose death while simultaneously alerting first responders.

Help is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week via the NY State OASAS Hopeline: 1-877-8-HOPENY. Long Island has a dedicated 24-hour hotline 631-979-1700. For in person assistance, 24 hours a day the DASH crisis and stabilization center operated by the Family Service League (90 Adams Ave in Hauppauge) is staffed around the clock to deal with walk in crisis situations.

For help with an alcohol or other drug issue call: LECSA EAP/MAP 631-851-1295