

Changing laws, attitudes of police response to drug overdose may lead to better outcomes

September 26 2013

A recent study from Rhode Island Hospital has found that a change in the way police respond to drug-related overdose emergencies could contribute to improved outcomes of the victims and to the communities where overdoses occur. The study found that while law enforcement officers often serve as medical first responders, there is a lack of clarity as to what police can do, or should do, at the scene of an overdose. The study is published online in advance of print in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*.

The study included interviews to better understand and prevent nonmedical prescription opioid use and overdose deaths in areas of Rhode Island and Connecticut that are experiencing overdose "outbreaks."

"Police officers are often limited by available resources or protocol when it comes to responding to overdose," said principal investigator Traci C. Green, Ph.D., a research scientist in Rhode Island Hospital's department of [emergency medicine](#). "While some expressed [negative attitudes](#) toward people who use drugs, others were empathetic and simply frustrated with the lack of drug treatment, the cycle of addiction, and the ease with which people can access drugs in their communities."

Green continued, "Overdose prevention and response, which for some officers included law enforcement-administered [naloxone](#), were viewed as components of community policing and good police-community relations." Naloxone (also known as Narcan) is the standard antidote

used by paramedics to stop overdose and restore breathing in an overdosing victim. Some communities, like Quincy, Mass., have seen expansion of first responder administered naloxone to include police, an effort supported by the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy as part of addressing the prescription opioid epidemic.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly three out of four prescription [drug overdoses](#) are caused by [prescription painkillers](#), or [opioids](#). In fact, there were 14,800 opioid overdose deaths in 2008, more than cocaine and heroin combined. And in 2010, more than 12 million people in the U.S. reported using prescription painkillers either without a prescription, or to get high.

Opioid pain relievers, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone and fentanyl, are the most commonly involved type of drug responsible for unintentional drug overdose. These types of overdose have increased significantly in rural and suburban areas, where individuals have less immediate access to emergency medical care. In these areas in particular, providing law enforcement with the tools and training necessary to administer naloxone to reverse a drug overdose could have a significant impact on the death rate from unintentional opioid overdose.

"Educating the public about overdose incidents, the prevalence, and the importance of prevention could go a long way toward aligning public health and criminal justice objectives, and ultimately reducing the number of [overdose deaths](#)," Green said.

Green continued, "In addition to saving lives, providing law enforcement officers with naloxone, and proper training for administration may also improve the relationships between law enforcement and their respective communities."

Provided by Lifespan

Citation: Changing laws, attitudes of police response to drug overdose may lead to better outcomes (2013, September 26) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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