

Expanding Access to Naloxone through Digital Prescribing Platforms to Address Opioid-Related Mortality

Opioids, used for pain relief, encompass both pharmaceutical types like morphine, oxycodone, and fentanyl patches, and non-pharmaceutical forms such as heroin and illicit fentanyl. In Ontario, a significant majority of opioid-related fatalities are attributed to non-pharmaceutical opioids, with illicit fentanyl being a primary cause. In 2021, these substances were responsible for 90% of opioid deaths. Naloxone, an effective medication for reversing opioid overdoses, was only utilized in 65% of these cases, highlighting a shortfall in its accessibility. Challenges in obtaining naloxone, such as limited awareness and societal stigma, likely contribute to this issue.

Between 2018 and 2021, the number of deaths due to accidental substance toxicity in Ontario nearly doubled, increasing from 1,586 to 2,886. Opioids played a role in 85% of these deaths, according to the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network's 2023 report¹. The growing issue of polysubstance use and the contamination of drug supplies further complicate the treatment landscape, especially when multiple sedative substances are combined, leading to an upsurge in fatalities among Canadians. The 2023 report also notes opioids' significant contribution to deaths involving alcohol, stimulants, and benzodiazepines, highlighting their pervasive impact. Notably, individuals under 45 years of age constituted 60% of opioid-related deaths in 2021.

To address this crisis, expanding access to naloxone is critical. Implementing digital platforms for automated prescribing of naloxone after high-risk encounters or for identified high-risk groups could markedly enhance its availability. Addressing this need is crucial, especially considering the escalating number of opioid deaths among younger populations.

Reference:

1. Gomes T, Leece P, Iacono A, Yang J, Kolla G, Cheng C, Ledlie S, Bouck Z, Boyd R, Bozinoff N, Campbell T, Doucette T, Franklyn M, Newcombe P, Pinkerton S, Schneider E, Shearer D, Singh S, Smoke A, Wu F, on behalf of the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network and Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Characteristics of substance-related toxicity deaths in Ontario: Stimulant, opioid, benzodiazepine, and alcohol-related deaths. Toronto, ON: Ontario Drug Policy Research Network; 2023.