

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION YOUNG PHYSICIANS SECTION

Resolution: 2
(A-19)

Introduced by: Michael S Sinha, MD, JD, MPH

Subject: Dispelling Myths of Bystander Opioid Overdose

Referred to: AMA-YPS Reference Committee

1 Whereas, 70,237 people died of drug overdoses in the United States in 2017, and
2 deaths related to synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, have increased considerably in the
3 last several years, accounting for 28,400 lives lost in 2017;¹ and

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5 Whereas, Higher doses of the opioid-reversal agent naloxone may be needed to reverse
6 the effects of potent synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and carfentanil, which often enter
7 the illicit drug supply as contaminants of other drugs like heroin and cocaine;² and

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9 Whereas, First-responders, such as police and firefighters, are often not aware of the
10 potential harm posed by exposure to white powdered substances that may consist of
11 heroin, cocaine, fentanyl, or other illicit drugs; and

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13 Whereas, Self-administration of naloxone is contraindicated in individuals who are
14 breathing independently and have not consumed opioids, which results in waste of a
15 limited and costly resource that is essential to any public health response to the opioid
16 epidemic; and

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18 Whereas, Stigma of opioid abuse and overdose has already made first-responders
19 reluctant to intervene in a timely manner when someone is suspected of overdosing, and
20 further delays in administration of naloxone in the setting of opioid overdose can have
21 fatal consequences; and

22
23 Whereas, There have been multiple media reports of police officers and firefighters
24 falling ill, reportedly due to brief dermal exposure to an unknown white substance, which
25 often leads to symptoms of panic and self-administration of intranasal naloxone, has
26 misrepresented the science behind fentanyl while increasing paranoia among the lay
27 public related to fentanyl;^{3 4 5} and

28
29 Whereas, Fentanyl is so poorly absorbed through the skin that it required years of
30 research to develop a fentanyl patch for topical delivery of the drug at extremely slow
31 rates of absorption;⁶ and

¹ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

² Moss RB, Carlo DJ. Higher doses of naloxone are needed in the synthetic opioid era. *Subst Abuse Treat Prev Policy*. 2019 Feb 18;14(1):6.

³ <https://www.statnews.com/2017/08/09/fentanyl-falling-ill/>

⁴ https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/8xk4jk/touching-fentanyl-absorbed-through-skin

⁵ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/04/29/fentanyl-overdose-police-accident-touching-drug/3615448002/>

⁶ https://www.acmt.net/_Library/Positions/Fentanyl_PPE_Emergency_Responders_.pdf

1 Whereas, Photos and videos purporting to show “the amount of fentanyl required to kill
2 hundreds or thousands of people” are misleading and exaggerate the risk of bystander
3 overdose and instead create fear among first-responders;⁷ and

4
5 Whereas, Companies have profited by marketing “fentanyl-resistant” gloves and
6 respirators, despite a lack of evidence that fentanyl aerosolizes or poses an inhalation
7 hazard in well-ventilated spaces;⁸ and

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9 Whereas, A recent JAMA Viewpoint titled “Protecting the Value of Medical Science in the
10 Age of Social Media and ‘Fake News’” identifies an important role for physicians in
11 correcting misconceptions that can have dangerous public health implications;⁹ and

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13 Whereas, A recent New York Times editorial, titled “Fear, Loathing, and Fentanyl
14 Exposure,” notes that “misinformation has triggered a panic about the risks [of fentanyl
15 exposure];”¹⁰ and

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17 Whereas, The American College of Medical Toxicology and the American Academy of
18 Clinical Toxicology issued a position paper on the topic in 2017, concluding that
19 inhalation and dermal exposure risk for fentanyl and other synthetic analogues is
20 extremely low in the absence of mucous membrane exposure;¹¹ and

21
22 Whereas, Our AMA policy “encourages the education of health care workers and opioid
23 users about the use of naloxone in preventing opioid overdose fatalities,” but does not
24 address non-medical first-responders or the dangers of misinformation and stigma in
25 impeding timely emergency response when opioid overdose is suspected; therefore, be
26 it

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28 RESOLVED, That our AMA develop and disseminate educational materials aimed at
29 dispelling the fear of bystander overdose via inhalation or dermal contact with fentanyl or
30 other synthetic derivatives, often arising from first responders who lack medical training
31 (Directive to Take Action); and be it further

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33 RESOLVED, That our AMA work with appropriate stakeholders to address instances of
34 misinformation in the mainstream media by systematically responding to misleading or
35 factually inaccurate news reporting of bystander overdose (Directive to Take Action);
36 and be it further

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38 RESOLVED, That our AMA publicly address misconceptions via press release and
39 broad dissemination of educational materials to first responders such as police and fire
40 departments in areas with highest concentration of opioid overdoses and deaths, and to
41 news media outlets seeking to cover the opioid epidemic in a scientifically responsible
42 manner (Directive to Take Action); and be it further

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44 RESOLVED, That this resolution be immediately forwarded for consideration at the 2019
45 Annual Meeting of the AMA House of Delegates. (Directive to Take Action)

⁷ How did enough fentanyl to kill “every man, woman and child in Cleveland” make it to the U.S.? 60 Minutes reports. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/deadly-fentanyl-bought-online-from-china-being-shipped-through-the-mail-60-minutes-2019-04-28/>

⁸ https://twitter.com/Devin_Reaves/status/1120821782926245888

⁹ Merchant RM, Asch DA. Protecting the Value of Medical Science in the Age of Social Media and “Fake News”. JAMA. 2018 Nov 19. doi: 10.1001/jama.2018.18416. [Epub ahead of print]

¹⁰ Fear, Loathing and Fentanyl Exposure. The New York Times Editorial Board. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/opinion/fentanyl-opioids-exposure.html>

¹¹ https://www.acmt.net/_Library/Positions/Fentanyl_PPE_Emergency_Responders_.pdf

Fiscal Note: Modest - between \$1,000 - \$5,000.

RELEVANT AMA POLICY

Prevention of Opioid Overdose D-95.987

1. Our AMA: (A) recognizes the great burden that opioid addiction and prescription drug abuse places on patients and society alike and reaffirms its support for the compassionate treatment of such patients; (B) urges that community-based programs offering naloxone and other opioid overdose prevention services continue to be implemented in order to further develop best practices in this area; and (C) encourages the education of health care workers and opioid users about the use of naloxone in preventing opioid overdose fatalities; and (D) will continue to monitor the progress of such initiatives and respond as appropriate.
2. Our AMA will: (A) advocate for the appropriate education of at-risk patients and their caregivers in the signs and symptoms of opioid overdose; and (B) encourage the continued study and implementation of appropriate treatments and risk mitigation methods for patients at risk for opioid overdose.
3. Our AMA will support the development and implementation of appropriate education programs for persons in recovery from opioid addiction and their friends/families that address how a return to opioid use after a period of abstinence can, due to reduced opioid tolerance, result in overdose and death.

References:

1. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>
2. Moss RB, Carlo DJ. Higher doses of naloxone are needed in the synthetic opioid era. *Subst Abuse Treat Prev Policy*. 2019 Feb 18;14(1):6.
3. <https://www.statnews.com/2017/08/09/fentanyl-falling-ill/>
4. https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/8xk4jk/touching-fentanyl-absorbed-through-skin
5. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/04/29/fentanyl-overdose-police-accident-touching-drug/3615448002/>
6. https://www.acmt.net/_Library/Positions/Fentanyl_PPE_Emergency_Responders_.pdf
7. How did enough fentanyl to kill "every man, woman and child in Cleveland" make it to the U.S.? 60 Minutes reports. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/deadly-fentanyl-bought-online-from-china-being-shipped-through-the-mail-60-minutes-2019-04-28/>
8. https://twitter.com/Devin_Reaves/status/1120821782926245888
9. Merchant RM, Asch DA. Protecting the Value of Medical Science in the Age of Social Media and "Fake News". *JAMA*. 2018 Nov 19. doi: 10.1001/jama.2018.18416. [Epub ahead of print]
10. Fear, Loathing and Fentanyl Exposure. The New York Times Editorial Board. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/opinion/fentanyl-opioids-exposure.html>
11. https://www.acmt.net/_Library/Positions/Fentanyl_PPE_Emergency_Responders_.pdf