

Fentanyl crisis: Prisons stock naloxone after guards exposed to opioid

TIFFANY CRAWFORD, VANCOUVER SUN 09.15.2016 |



The nasal spray version of naloxone or narcan. Credit: AP files [PNG Merlin Archive] *ASSOCIATED PRESS* /

Federal prison officers now have access to the life-saving opioid blocker naloxone, following a complaint that several front-line officers in B.C. were exposed to fentanyl.

Jason Godin, president of the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers, says members logged a complaint with the Correctional Service of Canada a few weeks ago after some guards at Mountain Institution in Agassiz fell ill.

He said paramedics had to administer naloxone to some of the affected officers, indicating that they had been exposed to fentanyl, an opioid that has led to a surge in overdose deaths in B.C. this year.

“Fentanyl is a very dangerous for front-line correctional officers,” Godin said, adding he did not have specific numbers on how many overdoses there have been in B.C. prisons. “I know we have issues with fentanyl in the prisons. There certainly has been a huge problem in B.C.”

Godin said over the past week the union has held several meetings with CSC, which agreed that the spray version of naloxone should be on site so officers have quick access in case of exposure.

“We put our concerns on the table to make sure our members are protected,” he said. Godin said the two parties agreed to have naloxone on site in a secured area instead of providing it to individual officers.

Prison staff are the latest front-line workers to stock naloxone — just as some police officers, paramedics and even university health staff are doing — as the number of overdose fatalities continues to rise in jails.

CSC spokesman Jean-Paul Lorieau said n

aloxone is also available to prison nurses and clinicians as part of an emergency medical response to drug overdoses.

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We are aware of the dangers posed by fentanyl and other opiates. We are learning more about various options for the use of naloxone in a correctional setting,” Lorieau said in a statement.

Vancouver police announced last week (<http://vancouversun.com/storyline/fentanyl-crisis-vancouver-cops-will-soon-carry-life-saving-naloxone>) that front-line officers have also been exposed to fentanyl, but none have been injured. The VPD announced that officers would begin carrying naloxone as a protection measure. The University of B.C. has also been handing out naloxone kits to students who say they are drug users.

The province declared a health crisis earlier this year in B.C. amid a growing number of overdoses and deaths linked to fentanyl. There were 433 overdose deaths recorded between Jan. 1 and July 31 in B.C, a nearly 75-per-cent increase compared with the same period in 2015, according to the coroner’s service. More than 60 per cent of those fatalities were linked to fentanyl-laced drugs.

Police say fentanyl, which is said to be 100 times stronger than morphine, has been recently showing up in a variety of party drugs such as cocaine and ecstasy.

Earlier this month, a group of nine friends in Delta began having breathing difficulties after taking what was believed to be a small amount of cocaine laced with fentanyl. They all survived but authorities fear it could have been worse if they hadn't called 911.

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