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Severe Opioid Overdoses in San Francisco Caused by Fentanyl-Containing “Xanax” Pill

From October 15 to 17, 2015, three individuals between the ages 20-40 years were seen at the San Francisco General Hospital after ingesting a pill inscribed and sold as “XANAX” purchased off the street. All three patients suffered complications of opioid overdose, including peripheral neuropathy, rhabdomyolysis, and pulmonary edema, with one requiring intubation and intensive care. A fourth individual was found deceased with the same pill on his person; there may be additional deaths. Analysis of pills demonstrated fentanyl; one also had etizolam. The source of the pills is unknown.

Fentanyl is an extremely potent, short-acting opioid that is particularly dangerous when used illicitly as it is normally dosed in tiny (microgram) quantities. Fentanyl may be more difficult than other opiates to reverse with naloxone, possibly requiring extra doses. Etizolam is a short-acting benzodiazepine analog that produces central nervous system depression. These two agents can be synergistic, resulting in marked respiratory and central nervous system depression. Pills purchased on the street may contain contaminants or may be replaced with other substances entirely, yet be indistinguishable from pharmaceutical products.

The San Francisco Department of Public Health encourages persons who may be exposed to opioids to have access to naloxone. Naloxone is a short-acting opioid antagonist that is sprayed intranasally or injected to reverse an overdose. Naloxone is not a controlled substance, can be prescribed by any licensed healthcare provider, and can be administered by witnesses as a first aid measure. Naloxone is covered by Medi-Cal, Healthy SF, and most health plans and can also be furnished by pharmacists registered to do so without a prescription. Naloxone is also available at no cost from the DOPE Project, targeting drug users and their friends and family via syringe exchange sites. These means of naloxone provision and use are protected by California law (AB635 and AB1535).

Actions requested of SF clinicians:

- 1. Discourage patients from purchasing pills on the street.**
- 2. Refer patients with opioid use disorder to treatment.** San Francisco has treatment-on-demand at BAART Turk Street and BAART Market Street methadone clinics close to Civic Center area.
- 3. Ensure patients who may access opioids from the street have naloxone.** Either direct patients to the DOPE Project or prescribe naloxone directly.

Resources:

- Providers or public can contact the California Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222 with any questions regarding overdose or symptoms after ingesting a pill.
- Treatment Referrals:
 - SFDPH triage center – Treatment Access Program (TAP) @ 1380 Howard St, 8am-4:30pm weekdays
 - BAART Clinic @ 433 Turk St, 7:30-Noon for same day methadone; Tel 415-928-7800 ask for intake counselor
 - List of physicians who provide buprenorphine: http://buprenorphine.samhsa.gov/bwns_locator/
- Naloxone from DOPE Project: Contact Eliza Wheeler at wheeler@harmreduction.org or Tel 510-285-2871
- Naloxone prescribing information (scroll down to Naloxone Prescribing, Education, and Awareness): <http://www.sfhealthnetwork.org/employee-physicians/pain-management-resources/>