Synthetic Opioids / Novel Psychoactive Substances: Impact on Canada’s Opioid Crisis

September, 2018
Objectives

• Provide an overview of the current opioid crisis in Canada

• Background on synthetic drugs / novel psychoactive substances (NPS) and how they link to the opioid crisis

• What more can be done to address NPS in the context of the opioid crisis

• Current treatment and prevention initiatives in place in Canada

• What is being done in Canada to help diminish stigma
What do we know about opioid use in Canada?

• Canadians are, per capita, the second highest consumers of prescription opioids in the world
  – Pharmaceutical companies used a variety of marketing approaches over the past 20 years that increased patient and physician comfort in the use of strong opioids for pain-management (CIHI, 2017)

• The growing number of overdoses and deaths related to opioids, including fentanyl, is a national public health crisis

• In 2016, there were 3,005 apparent opioid-related deaths in Canada and in 2017 there were close to 4000 (3,996) apparent opioid-related deaths in Canada.

• This is a 33% increase compared to 2016, and this is subject to change as new data becomes available.
Canada’s Opioid Crisis

There were 3,996 apparent opioid-related deaths in Canada in 2017

There have been more than 8,000 apparent opioid-related deaths since 2016

92% of deaths occurred were accidental

78% of accidental deaths occurred among men

22% were among women

28% of apparent opioid-related deaths in 2017 occurred among individuals in the 30 to 39 year age group.
The sharp rise in opioid-related deaths has made it a leading cause of mortality among working-age Canadians.

Rates by Leading Cause of Deaths for Canadians Aged between 30 and 39 (2014)

Death Rates per 100,000 population

- Opioid-Related Deaths (2017f): 22.2
- Accidents (All Types)*: 17.8
- Opioid-Related Deaths (2016): 15.2
- Malignant neoplasms: 13.4
- Suicide*: 13.1
- Heart Diseases: 5.6
- Homicide: 1.9
- Chronic liver disease: 1.9
- Diabetes: 1.4

f = forecasted (based on an estimated 4, 000 opioid-related deaths in 2017)
Data on accidents and suicide may include opioid-related deaths

Source: Statistics Canada AND National Report on Apparent Opioid-Related Deaths
What is Driving this Crisis?

1. **High rates of opioid prescriptions**
   - Canada is the second highest per capita consumer of opioids among all countries
   - In 2016, more than 20 million prescriptions for opioids were dispensed
   - A recent CIHI report suggested that overall quantity of opioids dispensed in Canada declined between 2012 and 2016. However, the proportion of people prescribed strong opioids remained steady

2. **Emergence of strong synthetic opioids** *(e.g., fentanyl, carfentanil)* in illegal drug supply
   - In Canada, the percentage of accidental deaths involving fentanyl or fentanyl analogues was 72% from January to September 2017 (compared to 55% in 2016)
   - In 2017, fentanyl was detected in 81% of illegal drug-related deaths in BC

* fentanyl – ~100 times stronger than morphine
* carfentanil – ~10,000 times stronger than morphine

Source: BC Centre for Disease Control
Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

- NPS pose a significant challenge to national and international scheduling mechanisms given:
  - their rapid development and proliferation; and
  - their chemical structures which are often designed to circumvent international and national legislative controls

- In Canada, synthetic opioids have posed a particular challenge in the context of the ongoing opioid crisis, with significant increases in seizures of fentanyl and fentanyl analogues since 2015

- Exponential increase in seizures of fentanyl or fentanyl analogues, often mixed with heroin or other substances
Pilot Survey on NPS to Detect Presence and Use in Canada

- An online NPS pilot survey was launched in October 2017 to document the demand for, and use of, NPS in Canada.
- The objective of this project is to act as a proof-of-concept for an early detection surveillance tool of NPS within Canada
- 134 self-identified users of NPS completed a survey on their NPS use

Results:
- Respondents were mostly male (86%) , 18-29 years old; more than a quarter (29%) started using before the age of 18
- 73% of respondents indicated that they first heard about NPS through the internet
- In a fifth of cases, respondents said they were taking the NPS to replace another drug, LSD (40%), followed by magic mushrooms (30%) and heroin (10%)
- The survey results provide insight for future surveillance activities
Implementation of a Canadian Drugs Observatory

- Canada is working with Provinces and Territories to implement a **Canadian Drugs Observatory**

- The CDO would:
  - **Strengthen evidence base** for policy development
  - Establish of an **early warning system** to detect and respond to emerging substance use issues
  - Facilitate of innovation by making **data readily accessible** across CDO stakeholders, and available to researchers and the public to some extent
  - Provide the ability to **intervene** in a timely fashion and **measure** impact
  - Improve **efficiency and accuracy** in all **reporting** obligations
Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy (CDSS)

• The Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy (CDSS) is a health focussed approach to substance use issues in Canada

• It is a comprehensive, collaborative and compassionate approach that is grounded in evidence

• It restored **harm reduction** as a key pillar, alongside **prevention, treatment, and enforcement**

• The strategy has helped guide the federal public health emergency response to the opioid crisis
Enforcement and Regulation
Enforcement and Regulation

- Under the enforcement pillar through the CDSS, the Government of Canada aims to take a balanced and comprehensive approach to reduce the supply of illegal drugs by working to prevent illegal manufacturing, trafficking, and the diversion of substances from medical use and scientific research into the illegal market.

- Through the CDSS, the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (CDSA) and its regulations, the Government of Canada aims to:
  - Regulate how controlled substances are used in Canada (e.g. to ensure they are used for authorized medical, industrial and research purposes)
  - Prevent controlled substances from being illegally smuggled into Canada through border control and surveillance activities
  - Pursue drug law enforcement activities to counter drug trafficking in a manner that balances public health and safety concerns and that focuses on organized crime (including seizing assets resulting from the illegal drug trade)
Canadian Legislative and Regulatory Approaches Towards Controlling Synthetic Drugs

• The CDSA was amended in May 2017 through Bill C-37 to include a number of new relevant authorities to address clandestine drug production and trafficking:
  
  – Makes it illegal to import an unregistered designated device (i.e. pill press or encapsulator);
  
  – Removes the 30 g or less mail exception from the Customs Act, enabling Canada Border Services Agency officers to open international mail of any weight, should they have reasonable grounds to suspect the item may contain prohibited, controlled or regulated goods; and
  
  – Extends offences and penalties for pre-production activities
Bill C-37: Temporary Scheduling of NPS

- In addition to the above amendments, the CDSA now allows the Minister of Health to temporarily add a substance to a schedule of the CDSA if there are reasonable grounds to believe that it:
  (a) poses a significant risk to public health or safety; or
  (b) may pose a risk to public health or safety and
     (i) is being imported into Canada with no legitimate purpose, or
     (ii) is being distributed in Canada with no legitimate purpose

- The temporary scheduling would be in effect for one year, with a possible extension for an additional year, hence two years in total

- Under this measure, simple possession of a temporarily scheduled substance would not be an offence so as to not punish individuals, particularly youth, who may have purchased a substance with the belief that it is legal
More Needs to Be Done

• The current approach focuses on enforcement measures and international discussions are technical, and the terminology and discussions are complex

• We need to do better in developing messaging and outreach strategies that can bring awareness to a broader group of people that an unknown synthetic product is likely to be less safe than the controlled alternatives

• This likely means extending the reach of expert panels to include communications specialists, front line workers, and people with lived experience with substance use

• Build trust or partner with trusted organizations to explain the dangers of synthetic NPS, so that they become the least preferred alternative to any other substance

• Change the perception on how design, production and distribution of synthetic NPS so it is not seen as clever, avant-garde, or associated with any positive connotation – to help ensure our populations reject being exposed to this risk
Prevention and Treatment Approaches
Prevention Approaches to the Opioid Crisis

- Prevention is a key pillar in the Government of Canada’s approach to problematic substance use through the Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy (CDSS)

- Updated guidelines, such as the CRISM guidelines for opioid prescribing

Prevention of Drug Overdoses

- Harm Reduction pillar under the CDSS

- Public information toolkit

- Outreach in festivals and universities

- Naloxone is available more widely available without a prescription
Treatment Approaches to the Opioid Crisis

• Treatment is also a key pillar under the CDSS

• Emergency Treatment Fund - increased access to evidence-based treatment for provinces and territories

• Supported the development of the CRISM national treatment guidelines

Regulatory Amendments:

• Removed barriers to prescribing and dispensing methadone and diacetylmorphine (medical grade heroin)

• Allowing the import of medications, not yet authorized in Canada, for urgent public health needs
Moving Forward: Key Federal Priorities for Actions

• Increase Access to Treatment
  – Explore removing regulatory barriers to treatment and expand treatment option among first Nations and Inuit communities
  – Support dissemination and implementations of National treatment guidelines and pilot projects for safe pharmaceutical alternatives
  – Provide emergency funding to provinces and territories for treatment services

• Support Innovative Approaches
  – Authorize supervised consumption sites and support pilot projects to offer drug checking services
  – Explore new ways in using and sharing data to help those on the front line
  – Work with provinces and territories to establish a streamlined protocol for temporary overdose prevention sites for instances of urgent need
  – Expand the Substance Use and Addiction Programs to fund innovative approaches to treatment and prevention
Stigma

Stigma is negative attitudes and beliefs about a group of people due to their circumstances in life. Stigma involves discrimination and prejudice.

Stigma Causes….
✓ Barriers to receiving health and social services.
✓ Reduced quality of care.
✓ People to be less likely to seek support and treatment again.

“Negative, stigmatizing language, whether it is used in a healthcare setting or in the news media, discredits people who use drugs and can result in discrimination. Stigmatization contributes to isolation and means people will be less likely to access services. This has a direct, detrimental impact on the health of people who use drugs.”

❖ Dr. Jane Buxton, harm reduction lead at the BC Centre for Disease Control.
Moving Forward: Federal Actions to Address Stigma

- Working with people with lived & living experience to shape policy and programming responses
- Address stigma through awareness and training (webpages/language tool)
- Fund peer-support pilot projects
- Make better linkages between social strategies and fair treatment for people who use drugs
- Stigma videos in partnership with British Columbia (BC) and Nova Scotia (NS)
- $18.7M/5 years to address stigma, including launching a multi-year public education campaign
More Information

Canada.ca/opioids

Find information about:

**Opioids**
Opioids relieve pain. Used properly they can often help. But problematic use can cause dependence, overdose and death.

**Opioid overdose**
Overdose risks and signs: how to respond.

**Naloxone**
Where to get a naloxone kit.

**Supervised consumption sites**
Find requirements, guidance, locations.

**Stigma**
Defining stigma and why it matters.

**Government response**
Our comprehensive, collaborative, compassionate and evidence-based response.

hc.opioidresponse-interventionopioides.sc@canada.ca