

Recent spate of overdoses a reminder of heroin blight

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Four near-deaths in a week illustrate extent of problem, authorities say

If you need proof that heroin is becoming a significant problem in Ozaukee County, consider this — last week, four suspected heroin overdoses were reported to authorities.

“From Friday to Friday, there were four,” Ozaukee County Sheriff’s Lt. Rodney Galbraith said. “There were three in less than 24 hours.”

Fortunately, he said, all the victims survived.

The first case occurred in the City of Cedarburg early May 2, when a 25-year-old man overdosed, Galbraith said.

Then, between May 7 and 8, three overdoses were reported — one each in the cities of Mequon and Port Washington and the Town of Saukville, he said.

In Port Washington, police were called to a home on the city’s north side just before midnight May 7 for a 24-year-old who wasn’t breathing.

The man was given two doses of Narcan, a drug used to counter the effects of opiate overdoses, by his mother before police arrived, Police Chief Kevin Hingiss told the Police and Fire Commission Monday.

The man was taken to Aurora Medical Center in Grafton for treatment, he said.

Police confiscated drug paraphernalia, including numerous syringes, tourniquets, marijuana pipes and cookers used to melt heroin into an injectable drug — enough to cover six tables at the police station — and substances believed to be cocaine and heroin, Hingiss said.

Police have asked that the man be charged with possession of drug paraphernalia, Hingiss said. If tests confirm he also had heroin and cocaine, additional charges will be sought.

In the Town of Saukville case, a woman called about 5:40 a.m. May 8 when she couldn’t wake her 22-year-old daughter, Galbraith said. The woman said she suspected an overdose because of her daughter’s past drug use.

But by the time emergency personnel arrived, he said, the 22-year-old was awake and responsive and denied using drugs. Neither of the women would cooperate with authorities, he said.

In several of the cases reported during the past week, Galbraith said, the victims were

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revived with Narcan.

The drug, he said, “wakes them up and allows people to get them to the hospital for treatment.”

But while Narcan is a blessing in that it can prevent overdoses from being fatal, Galbraith said, he sometimes worries that having it on hand may make drug users more confident that nothing will happen to them.

The four cases reported last week are yet another indicator that heroin use and abuse is a significant problem in the county, Galbraith said.

In two of the cases, he said, the victims were “people who were well familiar with us and had been arrested for committing thefts” to support their drug habits.

One, he said, had been out of jail for less than two weeks before the overdose.

Having this number of overdose cases in a week is unusual, Galbraith said.

“I hope it never gets to the point where it’s not a lot,” he said. “We’re just fortunate we’re not dealing with one or more overdose deaths here.”

But, he pointed out, the Sheriff’s Department doesn’t have a way to track cases of non-fatal drug overdoses.

Galbraith said the last heroin death in Ozaukee County occurred in January, when 31-year-old Joel C. Rebarchik was found dead with a syringe in his hand Jan. 18 in a basement bathroom of a house in Grafton.

Kirsten A. Nadolski of Milwaukee has been charged with first-degree reckless homicide in connection with the death.

Since 2009, Galbraith said, the Ozaukee County drug unit has investigated nine criminal opiate-related deaths in the county, about five of them involving heroin.

Unfortunately, he said, heroin use is a problem that isn’t going to go away anytime soon.

“This is a problem that’s going to get a worse before it gets better,” Galbraith said. “I don’t think there’s an easy way to measure how widespread this problem is.

“But I really haven’t seen anything to suggest the heroin problem is slowing down here. There’s no question in my mind it’s been on the rise and is a significant problem.”