

Opioid abuse in Canada a 'national health emergency': minister

18 November 2016

Deaths from opiate overdoses in Canada have become a "public health crisis" that could prompt the government to declare a national health emergency, the Canadian Health Minister said Friday.

If such a measure is found "appropriate and helpful," then "we will use all the tools available," Jane Philpott said in Ottawa at the opening of a national summit on the crisis.

Others participants reinforced the sense of urgency.

An estimated 2,000 Canadians died from opioid overdoses in 2015, said Don Davies, spokesman for the left-leaning New Democratic Party.

"Many provinces are seeing an even higher number of fatalities in 2016," he added.

"When you have 700-plus deaths occurring in Ontario each year, a similar number in British Columbia, growing numbers in places like Alberta and Manitoba, I think there is a societal understanding that we need to act urgently and effectively," Ontario Health Minister Eric Haskins said.

Experts say the crisis is being fueled by the proliferation of counterfeits of opiates such as fentanyl, a powerful sedative that caused the death of pop icon Prince in April.

In British Columbia, authorities recorded 332 fatal fentanyl overdoses during the first nine months of this year, three more than last year.

The drug is believed to be 100 times more potent than morphine.

"A lethal dose of pure fentanyl for a typical adult can be as little as two milligrams, or the size of a few grains of table salt," the federal police said.

The health care industry also took on some blame for opioid painkiller prescription practices, which often lead to addiction.

"We also recognize that opioid prescribing patterns are one of the many contributing factors to this crisis," the Canadian Medical Association said.

Ottawa resident Donna May said her daughter became hooked after a doctor prescribed the opiate OxyContin following a fall on a staircase.

Her daughter's addiction prompted her to buy fentanyl on the streets after her OxyContin prescription ran out, and she eventually ended up homeless, May told state broadcaster CBC before speaking at the conference.

"It eventually led to her contracting a flesh-eating disease and taking her life."

Solving the crisis, Philpott said, must involve increasing the number of medically supervised injection centers as well as the use of naloxone—which counteracts the effects of overdoses—by first responders in the field.

Vancouver—the only Canadian city that allows intravenous drug users to inject themselves with illegal substances under medical supervision—currently has a single injection center.

However, Montreal is set to open three, along with a mobile clinic.

Philpott said she wants to speed up the opening of centers "in communities that need them" by amending Canada's drug law, which is delaying the process.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has already changed the law to make naloxone available over the counter and distribute it to [federal police](#) officers for administering to victims.

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