

Deadly opioid carfentanil found in Oneida County — a first for upstate New York

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Carfentanil, an opioid used to tranquilize elephants, has arrived in upstate New York's illicit drug market for the first time — with Oneida County as ground zero.

Tests out of Oneida County confirmed it. Three urine samples from new patients in Helio Health's Opioid Treatment Center on Court Street in Utica tested positive in one week for the opioid, which is 10,000 times more powerful than morphine and 100 times more powerful than fentanyl, according to the federal Drug Enforcement Agency.

All three patients are from Oneida County, according to Helio Health.

The Oneida County Opioid Task Force sent out a warning about the presence of the powerful drug.

"We have always known that when people buy substances off the street, that the quality is undetermined," said Jeremy Klemanski, president and CEO of Helio Health. "These are not chemicals that are being mixed in laboratories for the most part.

"People just don't know what they're taking," he added.

The Upstate New York Poison Center has fielded a number of reports of overdose patients who told health care providers that they took carfentanil, said Administrative Director Michele Caliva.

But patients aren't always aware of what they're really taking, she said. This is the first time a laboratory has confirmed the presence of carfentanil in the drug supply in the center's 54-county service area, Caliva said.

"The problem with carfentanil is it is intended for large animals," said Michele Caliva, administrative director for the Upstate New York Poison Center. "And it is many, many, many times more toxic, or has more intense clinical effects, than taking another opioid."

How did it get here?

The situation has triggered an intriguing question in Caliva's mind, she said: Why Oneida County?

"It seems like we often hear from our colleagues in Oneida County or in Madison County about some emerging trend," Caliva said.

It started in 2012 when bath salt and synthetic marijuana use soared in Oneida and Madison counties before they became significant problems elsewhere, she said.

"Is there something in the drug supply chain that we just are not party to?" Caliva said.

News of carfentanil has triggered fear in the local opioid use disorder community, said Erin Wiggins, coordinator of the peer advocates at the Center for Family Life and Recovery.

"People are asking — is it in heroin, fentanyl or other substances like molly and K-2?" she said.

It's also had a chilling effect among first responders because of the risk of accidental exposure to such a strong opioid, said Dan Broedel, director of the Midstate Regional Emergency Medical Services Council.

“They are approaching overdoses and most types of call with more caution than usual,” he said. “They are very aware of the potential hazards that they face and they’re taking the precautions that they can.”

For Klemanski, the presence of carfentanil locally means it’s a good time for people to reach out to a provider for treatment.

“This is one more reminder of just how risky substance abuse is,” he said. “We just hope even a few people will hear this and say ‘Man, this is just too much and I want to get out of this.’”

Authorities spread awareness

The federal DEA first put out a warning about carfentanil in September 2016 after DEA staff, local law enforcement and first responders reported seeing it in various parts of the country.

Because of its potency, carfentanil poses a two-fold concern, Caliva said.

“A: That the dose is quite high and again, meant for large animals like an elephant versus a human and so the clinical effects are going to be profound,” she said. “And B: These individuals are going to need Narcan (the drug that can reverse opioid overdoses). Giving them a dose is fine and they’re going to wake up.

“But they’re not going to stay awake.”

People who take synthetic opioids related to fentanyl, and particularly carfentanil, will need multiple doses of Narcan, which only lasts for 45 minutes, she said. It is imperative that anyone giving a dose of Narcan in the community also call 911 because overdose victims will need follow up care to survive, she said.

The fear is that carfentanil will be mixed into other drugs without the knowledge of drug users who may unwittingly use too much. But apparently, some people are willingly taking drugs that they believe to be laced with carfentanil, Caliva said.

“This one boggles my mind because this is a synthetic opioid, that is a synthetic, fentanyl-like opioid that has real, real significant central nervous system and respiratory effects,” she said. “It really has some very serious effects and yes, of course, it’s life-threatening.”

ACR Health hands out fentanyl test strips in its nine-county service area so drug users can check whether drugs may be more potent than they realize to reduce the risk of overdose. Carfentanil will show up on those strips because it’s a structural analog of fentanyl, said Roberto Gonzalez, syringe exchange program manager.

But that’s not that helpful because the strips won’t tell users which of fentanyl’s roughly 600 analogs is present, he said.

“The most effective approach we’ve taken,” he said via email, “is to educate individuals of the dangers of consuming fentanyl and carfentanil, educate and train them on overdose prevention, provide them with naloxone (or, Narcan) kits as well as fentanyl test strips.”

ACR Health is looking for other clinical tools, Gonzalez said, to give a better picture of what substances are actually in a drug to more effectively prevent overdoses and save lives.

In the meantime, Helio Health felt it had a “moral obligation” to spread the word on carfentanil, Klemanski said.

As for the three patients whose tests came back positive, a counselor has shared their results with them, explaining how lethal carfentanil can be and encouraging them to warn others and work with law enforcement to whatever extent they’re comfortable, Klemanski said.

“We can encourage them to take steps that might help others,” he said.