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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Fentanyl Use Is Empowering?

New York City's Health Department delivers a deadly message.

By Kevin Sabet

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An alert on fentanyl in New York, Aug. 8, 2017.

PHOTO: SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

The New York City Health Department's "Let's Talk Fentanyl" campaign made headlines for placing posters that promoted illegal drug use: "Don't be ashamed you are using, be empowered that you are using safely." Amid an unprecedented overdose crisis, public-health officials should acknowledge the impossibility of "using safely." Treatment with the goal of full recovery is the way to prevent overdoses.

The posters' message is right in one respect: Users shouldn't be shamed for having a substance-use disorder. Negative perceptions of addiction too often discourage people from seeking help and result in preventable deaths. But asserting that drugs empower users desensitizes the public to the real harms of drug use. Lower risk perceptions will result in more casual experimentation. The desensitization and normalization of drug use will inevitably result in more overdoses.

The poster's message falls under an emerging drug-policy approach known as "harm reduction," which aims to reduce the risks of continued substance use rather than intervening to stop it. That encompasses some sensible policies, such as the distribution of naloxone to reverse opioid overdoses. But promoting drug use as empowering and safe is irresponsible and deadly.

Harm-reduction policies often prolong drug use and fail to increase admissions to treatment while raising the likelihood of an overdose. Oregon decriminalized the possession of hard drugs via a 2020 ballot initiative, which also expanded harm-reduction programs. Less than 1% of users have entered treatment. Law-enforcement sources told Portland's KGW-TV that this approach, in the station's summary, has "led to a huge increase in the amount of drugs on the streets—and now, an increase in crime," including assault, prostitution and drug dealing.

In New York City, 2,062 residents died of overdoses in 2020, up almost 38% from 2019—and nearly 8 in 10 were from fentanyl. Yet public-health officials believe that telling users to consume drugs like fentanyl "safely" will somehow alleviate this crisis.

Treatment and accountability must remain the primary pathway to a healthy, drug-free life. Public-health officials should focus on reducing the frequency of drug use rather than pretend it can be safe and empowering. By expanding treatment availability, educating about the harms of drug use, and ensuring that people know addiction can be overcome, officials can turn the corner of the overdose epidemic.

Real harm reduction is about meeting people where they are. But let's make sure we don't leave them there.

Mr. Sabet is CEO of Smart Approaches to Marijuana and the Foundation for Drug Policy Solutions. He was a senior policy adviser in the Obama and Bush White House.

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