

Opioid Deaths At Record Levels Locally

By **Pamela Vanmeer** - January 8, 2021



Photo by Kevin Bidwell from Pexels

KAWARTHA LAKES-According to data obtained from Public Health Ontario, 2020 could be the deadliest year yet for Opioid overdoses and deaths locally.

For the first eight months of 2020 there were 25 confirmed or probable deaths from Opioid overdoses in the Haliburton Kawartha Pine Ridge (HKPR) District Health Unit catchment area. That's 25% higher than the total for the entire year in 2019. There were 20 deaths in 2019.

In 2018 the numbers spiked to a record high of 30 deaths but in 2016 there was only 8 deaths and 10 in 2017.

The data for the final four months of 2020 is not yet available.

"Public Health Ontario (PHO) receives its data from the coroner's office, and the data in that too can lag as it can take 6 months or longer for opioid-related deaths to be confirmed by the coroner." PHO media relations told Kawartha 411 News.

Emergency department visits also jumped to the highest level since 2003 locally. In 2019 data from Public Health Ontario shows 10,478 ED visits in 2019, up from 9,154 in 2018. 1,995 of those were hospitalized in 2019. That's down slightly from 2018 when 2,110 people were hospitalized.

According to PHO the drug Fentanyl accounted for 85% of the deaths in 2019 followed by Carfentanil and Methadone. There's no hard data available on this yet for 2020 but experts say they have a good idea what is causing the problem.

"Anecdotally, we know of situations in which toxic illicit drugs have been used locally, with very bad results. (For whatever reason, the problem has (seems to have gotten worse)" Catherine MacDonald, Substances and Harm Reduction Co-ordinator, HKPR Health Unit told Kawartha 411 News.

"Overdoses have increased during COVID-19 – and that makes it very (extra) important for people who use substances to be extra careful when doing so and be more discerning of where they get their drug supplies. The risk of COVID-19 also heightens the dangers of substance use

Naloxone is used to temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose but it does not reverse an overdose that involves other drugs and stimulants such as cocaine, crack-cocaine, methamphetamine, as well as pharmaceutical stimulants.

"In some situations, a person's opioid supply has become (could become) contaminated with a stimulant or vice versa. This could happen for a variety of reasons, including deliberate acts or dubious suppliers." MacDonald says. "Regardless of how the drug supply is contaminated, naloxone would not be fully effective if a stimulant is present."

MacDonald is highlighting the importance of not using drugs alone, even in these times of COVID-19.

"People should also be aware of legal protections in place to shield people from prosecution in the event of an overdose. The Good Samaritan Act offers legal protection for anyone who helps out in an emergency, including administering naloxone in an overdose situation. The Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act protects anyone on scene of an overdose from being charged for simple possession or use of drugs." MacDonald Explained

MacDonald Says in order to effectively address the opioid crisis in our community, we need to set aside personal concerns and opinions, and treat people impacted by opioids with compassion and dignity.

"Individuals who use substances and suffer overdoses are *still* people – someone's friend, brother, daughter, parent, aunt, uncle or grandparent. We need to remember this and see value in harm reduction efforts to save lives and reduce the risk of overdoses in City of Kawartha Lakes, Haliburton County and Northumberland County."

She recommends people visit the Health Unit website for [additional steps to reduce their harm when using drugs during the pandemic](#).

Pamela Vanmeer

Pamela VanMeer is a two time winner of the prestigious Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) Award. Her investigative reports on abuse in Long Term Care Homes garnered international attention for the issue and won the Ron Laidlaw Award. She is a former reporter and anchor at CHEX News, now Global Peterborough and helped launch the New CHEX Daily, a daily half hour talk show. While at CHCH News in Hamilton she covered some of the biggest news stories of the day.