

# Warnings on the street about powerful opiate

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Extra. "There was no sign of fentanyl around at that time."

"On the street, people don't necessarily know what it is. They were just calling it heroin or china white. We've been dealing with this spike since late June," Eliza Wheeler, project manager for the Dope Project, told The Extra. DPH contracts with her organization to distribute naloxone citywide through needle exchange programs, the AIDS Foundation, Glide, the Drug Users Union, St. James Infirmary, Martin DePorres, Homeless Youth Alliance and to the jail, Wheeler said.

A sign on the Drug Users Union front door at 149 Turk warns: "Super strong white powder heroin in S.F. May need extra Narcan/naloxone to stop overdose." Signs posted throughout the Vincent Hotel, where a memorial was held Aug. 21 for career addict Vera Pettway (see page 8), contained similar warnings.

"All the needle exchanges have been mobilized about this for two months," Wheeler said.

City Hall itself was the scene of an overdose rescue Aug. 18, when a deputy there got word of "an unresponsive male" in a restroom. Sgt. J. Caramucci jimmied the bathroom stall open with a pocketknife, noticed a needle still sticking out of Richard Giles Bertram's arm, and successfully oversaw his transport to S.F. General by Fire Department medics, who arrived within four minutes.

Bertram survived. A Sheriff's Department test of residue in a baby jar lid found at the scene determined that it was heroin. Coffin says the scenario sounds much like a fentanyl overdose.

Coffin said the SFPD is also being supplied with the antidote, though new Tenderloin Capt. Teresa Ewins told The Extra that her officers have not yet been trained to administer naloxone. Coffin, however, said that SFPD had, for the first time, used naloxone to reverse an overdose in recent weeks. Ewins told The Extra that Mission Station officers are now equipped with naloxone.

Wheeler says the Dope Project is phasing out distribution of Naloxone nasal kits, which cost \$80 each. Injectable kits, however, cost about \$3, and the manufacturer, Kaleo, donates them to the Dope Project.

DPH recently obtained a sample of the dope someone had overdosed on, tested it, and found it to be fentanyl. "It was the first time we've suspected fentanyl and in fact found it," Coffin said. So little is known about it, he added, that

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Eliza Wheeler  
PROJECT MANAGER, DOPE PROJECT

it's still unclear if what's on the street is pharmaceutically produced or black market.

Fentanyl, a synthetic, has been around for 25 years, Coffin said. Cancer patients may take the drug in skin patches or, as a faster-acting alternative, fentanyl lollipops.

Heroin and other opiates can kill by overdose when the drug gradually blocks receptors in the brain that tell the body to breathe, so the user doesn't, and suffocates, Coffin said. Death from a heroin overdose usually takes more than an hour, but powerful fentanyl is much faster.

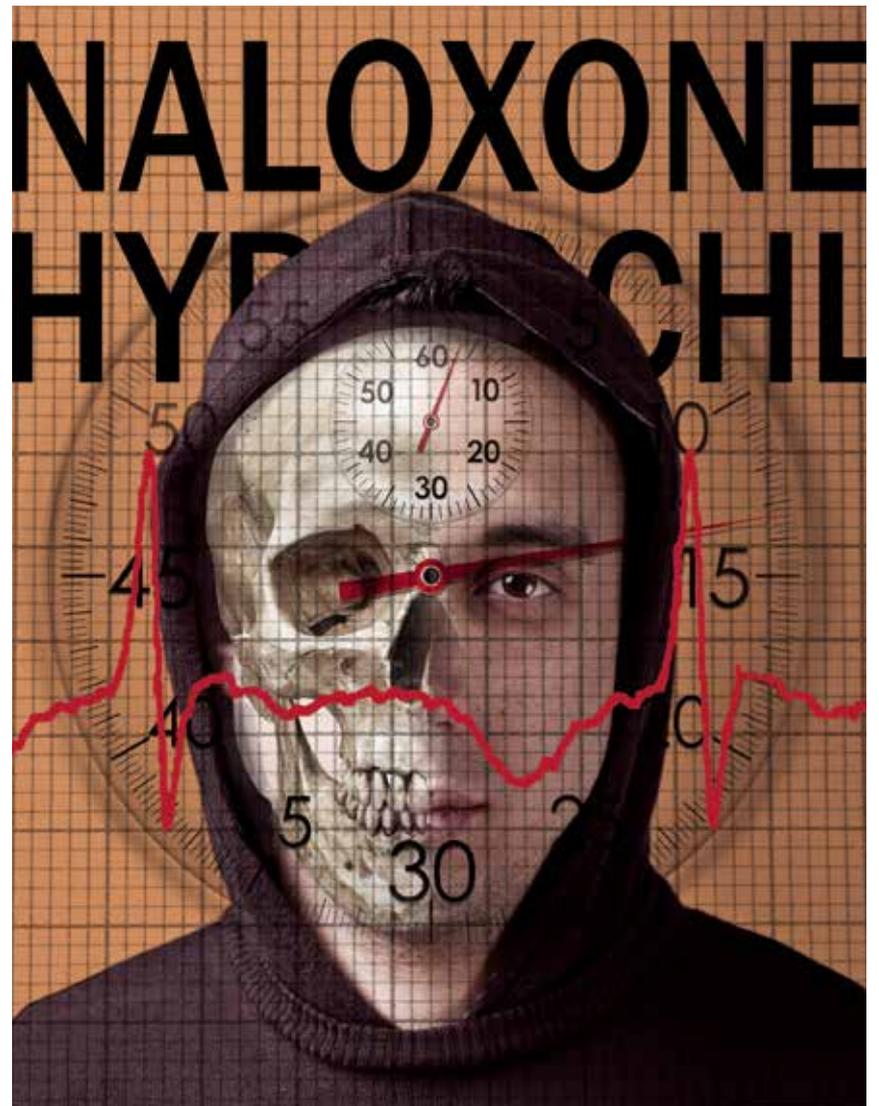
"It's pretty darn dangerous," Coffin said. He told The Extra that although there are no confirmed deaths due to fentanyl in the city so far, he was awaiting a medical examiner's report on one recent fatal OD.

DPH estimates San Francisco has 15,000 to 20,000 intravenous drug users, with about 10 heroin-related deaths a year. "We're experiencing a far lower rate of fatal overdoses than we should," Coffin said.

Wheeler credits the widespread availability of naloxone for the relatively low mortality rate among heroin users in San Francisco. The Dope Project, which got its start as a fiscally sponsored project of the Study Center, which publishes Central City Extra, has trained about 6,000 San Franciscans in naloxone's use since 2003 and received "about 1,900" reports of people being rescued from an overdose by the administration of this quick and easy antidote, Wheeler said.

Deaths from prescription opiates such as Oxycontin, percocet, codeine, oxymorphone, or hydromorphone, however, occur in San Francisco at about 10 times the rate of heroin-related deaths, Coffin said. Although naloxone use could prevent some of these deaths, that population has proven harder to reach.

Coffin said paramedics now also carry naloxone antidote kits for drug OD emergencies. ■



DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION: LISE STAMPFLI

**Naloxone, the lifesaving antidote to heroin overdose, is widely available to junkies and chippers. When the user shoots too much dope, the body reacts in ways that can lead to death. The overloaded brain can numb and forget to tell the lungs to breathe. Within maybe an hour, the user is dead. Unless naloxone is administered by nasal spray or IV to bring the person back to life. Thus the story line depicted in this digital image.**

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