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Medical Director
Iowa Poison Control Center
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POISON ALERT: Concern for Potent Narcotics Being Sold As Heroin

The Iowa Poison Control Center was recently consulted on two cases of heroin overdose which resulted in cardiac arrest in both persons. In one instance the person was resuscitated, but in the other case, the person could not be resuscitated and died. These two overdoses occurred in close geographical proximity to each other.

While both persons were reported to have been using heroin, the exact opioid which they used is not known at this time. There have been many reports from across the U.S. in the past several months in which other, far more potent, synthetic opioids had been mixed with, or substituted for, heroin. Fentanyl, carfentanil and U-47700 have been found in street drugs purported to be heroin. Fentanyl is approximately 50 times more potent than heroin and carfentanil is 100 times more potent than fentanyl. U-47700 is approximately 3-4 times more potent than heroin.

Naloxone (Narcan) is an opioid antagonist that can be lifesaving when administered to persons who have overdosed on heroin or other opioids. Naloxone reverses the respiratory and CNS depression characteristic of opioid overdoses. Persons who have overdosed on heroin that has been mixed with either fentanyl or carfentanil will require larger than normal doses of naloxone to see an effect.

The IPCC is issuing this alert to first responders, EMS and hospital health care providers as a reminder that synthetic opioids are far more potent (and far more deadly) than heroin, yet may be sold as heroin. Larger doses of naloxone may be required to effectively reverse the opioid effects of these synthetic opioids.

Please report all heroin or opioid overdoses to the Iowa Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222.