

Heroin overdoses setting a tragic pace

Eight people have died of drug overdoses in Richland County so far this year. Several other cases are pending.

“It’s just a continuation of what’s been happening,” Richland County coroner’s Investigator Tom Stortz said. “We’re hoping at some point it starts to slow down. It’s so hard to stop it.”

Because of the scope of the problem, the News Journal and CentralOhio.com are doing an expansive drug project this year, including taking a look at each person who died of an overdose.

“The overdoses are increasing with the availability of heroin,” Mansfield police Chief Ken Coontz said.

Four of the county’s eight overdoses this year can be attributed to heroin.

Coontz said the METRICH Enforcement Unit set a goal of confiscating 700 grams of heroin in 2014. It has already matched that total.

Stortz said people are gambling by taking heroin that could be mixed with other substances.

“You don’t know what’s in it,” he said. “You’re playing Russian roulette every time you do that.”

Fentanyl, a painkiller that is 80 times more powerful than morphine, has been found in the system of three OD victims.

“We’ve put out some alerts about Fentanyl,” Coontz said. “It’s not something you want to consume.”

The other two fatal overdoses involved Xanax and cocaine, respectively.

“Everybody’s always finding some way to get high,” Stortz said.

The following is a thumbnail sketch of each of the overdose cases in 2014, with information provided from the coroner’s reports:

- Ashley Sweeney, 25, died Jan. 4. Her mother found Sweeney in her Glenwood Heights home, a syringe cap next to her arm. Mansfield police asked Sweeney’s mother if she knew where the needle was. She had removed it to prevent injury to others.

The coroner’s office ruled Sweeney died of a heroin overdose. She had a history of heroin use.

- Krista Dodson, 30, died Jan. 8. Her cousin and her cousin's husband found her body at 41 Chestnut St. Dodson's cousin said she had gone to bed around 12:30 a.m. She was snoring at 9:30 but was unresponsive when they returned.

A coroner's investigator found a small packet of white powder and one Xanax tablet on her. Dodson had a history of opioid dependency. She was reported to use Xanax that was not prescribed.

Autopsy and toxicology reports showed there was a lethal amount of Xanax in Dodson's system. Diphenhydramine also was present.

- An inmate at Mansfield Correctional Institution, Rodney Simmering II died Jan. 18. Staff members found him unresponsive in his cell. The toxicology report revealed elevated levels of Fentanyl in his blood. Morphine also was present. Simmering's alcohol level was 0.155, nearly twice Ohio's legal driving limit.

His death was ruled an accidental overdose.

- Lorie Rinehart, 50, died Feb. 2. She was found sitting in a living room chair by a friend who had a key and was checking on Rinehart's dogs.

There was an apparent needle mark on her left wrist and what appeared to be blood on a paper towel. Authorities found drug paraphernalia, including a spoon that was suspected to have been used to cook heroin. The family said Rinehart had a history of substance abuse.

- Jeremiah Beaver, 28, died Feb. 16. He was found by his mother and his stepfather, who checked his apartment after not hearing from him for two days.

Authorities found numerous bottles of beer and vodka in the residence. The toxicology report indicated recent heroin use and a blood-alcohol content of 0.221, nearly three times the state's legal driving limit.

- Angela Weirick, 34, died Feb. 28. Her daughter found her in her Lexington home. Weirick was pronounced dead at OhioHealth MedCentral Mansfield Hospital. Family members said she was a frequent heroin user.

In July 2012, Weirick was treated for withdrawal from heroin. She had been in and out of rehab, according to her daughter, and had managed to stay off heroin for up to three years.

Her autopsy showed Fentanyl use.

- Patricia Kershner, 62, died March 4. She was transported to the hospital in cardiac arrest by the city fire department. Kershner's condition deteriorated, and she was pronounced dead several hours later.

Kershner's family said she started smoking marijuana at age 14 and began heavy cocaine use four years ago. The autopsy showed recent cocaine use and severe heart disease.

- Michael Mitchell's body was found along Hull Road in Madison Township on April 5. A passerby noticed him lying against a power pole. He was 29.

Toxicity showed heroin, Fentanyl, amphetamine, citalopram and THC. Mitchell reportedly had been partying with several other people on Chestnut Street when he died.

Coontz knows there will be more overdose victims.

"It really is a growing epidemic," the chief said. "It's a daily battle."

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