

On November 14, 2019 we engaged members of our campus community in a conversation about the implications of the opioid crisis for our campus. Their ideas provide direction for harm reduction at UBC Okanagan.

Opioid Dialogue

Listening for direction

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Voice
CAMPUS HEALTH PROJECT

Introduction

In 2016, British Columbia declared a public health emergency because of the rising number of opioid overdose deaths. This same year, the increase in illicit fentanyl use resulted in 930 overdose deaths in BC, a 79.2% increase from 2015. The substantial increase in fatalities triggered a province-wide response to increase awareness and resources (BC Center for Disease Control [BCCDC], 2019). The increase in resources did little to slow the progression of the opioid epidemic as death tolls continued to rise to 1,495 and 1,542 overdoses in 2017 and 2018 respectively (BC Coroners Service, 2019). Current statistics show 709 opioid overdose deaths occurred from January 2019 – August 2019 (BC Coroners Service, 2019). Interior Health reported one of the highest overdose rates in the province with a rate of 33.2 per 100,000 people (Interior Health, 2019). The majority of accidental apparent opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl or fentanyl-related substances.

The population most at risk to experience an unintentional illicit drug overdose is men between the ages of 20 and 59 (BC Coroners Service, 2019). Due to the number of overdose deaths in this population, their life expectancy has been stagnant for three years in a row, the longest stagnation of life expectancy on record (Statistics Canada, 2020). This demographic is represented at UBC Okanagan.

Our Dialogue

Over the past two years, VOICE has held opioid dialogues on campus to promote a better understanding of perspectives related to the use of opioids and other drugs. As part of this ongoing initiative, VOICE student team members invited campus community members to share perspectives on the opioid crisis and its implications for our campus. The dialogue took place on November 14, 2019, and was facilitated by two VOICE student team members. In addition to the student facilitators, eleven people participated (9 students and 3 staff members). After sharing information related to the opioid crisis in the Okanagan and BC, the following questions were used to invite discussion about the opioid crisis:

1. With regards to the opioid epidemic, what does this all mean for our campus?

2. How can our campus community come together to reduce the risks associated with drug use?
3. What would it take to create change on this issue on our campus?

There was general agreement that education on opioids and other substances was lacking on campus. Students wanted to see better access to educational and harm-reduction resources (e.g., information on the Health and Wellness website, drug effects, questions to ask dealers, where and when Naloxone training occurs, drug checking services). Students thought it was imperative to address the educational needs of students from outside of BC through programs such as Jump Start. Participants believed that naloxone training was important but that more harm reduction measures were necessary. A few students wondered whether people using opioids might have a false sense of security when they had a naloxone kit.

Participants discussed party culture and substance use. They thought there was a “go big or go home” mentality at large events such as FROSH or RECESS, where students reportedly consumed large amounts of alcohol, MDMA and cocaine. Personal anecdotes were shared about the riskier behaviour at these events and the increased incidences of sexual violence. The group thought that the student union promoted messaging around high risk partying for their large events and did not adequately counter these messages with harm reduction, safe spaces or supports for students. The group wanted these safety concerns addressed. In contrast, participants thought that private parties were associated with fewer risk-taking behaviours, and had more cannabis consumption and less alcohol consumption. The group also shared that, regarding substance use, residences advisors (RA) were viewed as punitive rather than a resource/support, and that there should be more education for students regarding how RAs can help. Students have reportedly been encouraged to have their parties at Academy Hill, where they cannot be reprimanded by RAs.

Based on the discussion, the group recommended new ways to share information about substance use and harm reduction. Suggestions included:

1. Create a position called “party angels”. These “angels” would be individuals who remain sober, are trained in lower-risk partying (e.g., drinking guidelines, naloxone trained), receive free entry to events, and may remain anonymous.
2. Increase support for off-campus students (e.g., Academy Hill) and promote lower risk partying on campus by providing information on the RA’s role.
3. Develop a space on campus to promote harm reduction, including trained staff (e.g. substance use counsellor), and drug-checking services. This should include a plan for more effective advertising of these resources.
4. Increase resources on campus related to adverse events that happen at parties (e.g., overconsumption, assaults).

Conclusion

The participants in this dialogue provided important insights about substance use and party culture on our campus. Discussions centered on availability of educational resources, the benefits of drug checking, types of drugs used and changing the party culture. The dialogue provided important information to guide planning, advertising and hosting future dialogues, as well as recommendations for resources that are needed at UBCO to support lower-risk substance use.

References

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