

Dufferin EMS chief says overdose calls 'still common' in region

Written By PAULA BROWN

Shelburne is not immune to drugs and overdoses.

This is the message Sgt. Paul Neumann says the Shelburne Police Services (SPS) was wanting to get across in a recent press release, following a drug overdose in the community.

'The idea was to bring awareness so that everybody recognizes first that we are not immune to these things,' said Stg. Neumann.

In mid-June Shelburne Police and Dufferin County Paramedics responded to a call for an overdose finding a person unresponsive and not breathing. An officer administered Narcan (naloxone), initiated CPR and the patient became responsive again, with further treatment administered by paramedics while en route to Headwaters hospital. The patient survived.

According to the Government of Canada Science, Health and Data website, there were 3,823 deaths nationwide in 2019 due to drug overdoses. In total, last year, there were 21,000 suspected opioid-related overdoses that required medical attention). Further data showed that 94 percent of the overdoses were accidental.

'I would definitely say our addictions to both alcohol and drugs have increased over time, certainly,' said Dufferin EMS Chief Tom Reid, who has been a paramedic for almost 37 years.

From January 2019 to September 2019 Dufferin County recorded 178 overdoses, evidence of the worsening opioid crisis. Local emergency responders have tried, in recent years, to do their part to educate the community about the dangers of illicit drugs, forming the Dufferin Overdose Awareness Council. Launched in 2017, the organization is made up of members from Dufferin EMS, Family Transition Place and both the Orangeville and Shelburne police services.

The organization's mandate? To save lives. From Jan. 2016 to Dec. 2019, there were 15,393 apparent opioid-related deaths nationwide. Statistics show a dangerous upwards trajectory in the number of deaths year over year from 2016 to 2018, with 3,017 deaths occurring in 2016, 4,100 deaths occurring in 2017, and 4,460 deaths occurring in 2018. While the first half of 2019 appeared to be following that upwards trend, with 2,159 deaths reported between January and June, the curve dipped for the second half of the year, with 1,641 deaths occurring between July and December.

With Mr. Reid indicating numbers weren't particularly dropping across the County, Sgt. Neumann says that Shelburne Police feel they have fewer numbers compared to the surrounding areas.

'We've had two overdoses reported to us, that we as police have responded to, in the last two years,' said Neumann. 'It's not like we're going to them on a weekly or monthly bases.'

He added, 'It's maybe not as bad as some of the bigger areas, but it certainly is here in our community of Dufferin County. We need to be aware of it and do whatever we can to prevent it.'

In comparison to the number of calls that Shelburne Police have responded to, Dufferin EMS reports so far this year show 97 calls for assistance with overdoses. These numbers are based on how a patient presents at a scene when paramedics arrive.

In an email to the Free Press, Chief Reid noted that Dufferin EMS overdose data had slowed down during the COVID-19 pandemic but have already seen increased numbers since the reopening and suggests that the numbers will likely be high in 2020.

While statistics posted on the Government of Canada website support the general belief that overdoses, generally speaking, occur

amongst the younger generation, males specifically, Chief Reid has previously made the point that the epidemic, at least locally, does not discriminate.

“This is an issue that isn't isolated to any particular group,” Mr. Reid told the Free Press back in September 2019. “When you talk about people having pre-judgements about who suffers with addiction, it's everyone. I can tell you that as a matter of fact. I can absolutely assure you that this is not an isolated issue. I can't get into specifics because of confidentiality, but this is something that is happening (to different people and different age groups). This isn't one group, this is happening to our community.”

He spent time discussing how people can look out for and spot an overdose, while explaining one potential method for success should you find yourself in a situation where you have to treat someone suffering from an overdose.

“When you see that a person is unconscious, or know that someone may have had too much of something, make sure you call 911. Get them the help they need,” Mr. Reid stated. “If the individual is unconscious, we want to make sure people are starting artificial respiration. Lay the individual on their back, tilting their head back and breath for them (mouth-to-mouth) every five seconds. If there's no pulse, start CPR.”

He added, “Naloxone is great, but if they're not breathing, it doesn't do much for them. For every minute a person isn't breathing, their possibility of being resuscitated decreases by ten percent. So, it's really important to start breathing, apply naloxone and call 911. By having those three things together, that increases the chances of survival. That's what we need to coach people to do. That will help us to save more lives.”

Cocaine, methamphetamines, opioids, and fentanyl are a few of the drugs that both Shelburne Police and Dufferin EMS say they've seen over the years.

“One of our biggest concern is not one specific drug, but a cocktail of drugs,” said Chief Reid. “It makes it more difficult to treat.”