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Suspected drug overdoses increase in Dufferin-Caledon

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There's weight in numbers.

And there's a particular heaviness in the numbers that indicate a stark reality, the realization of which seems to hit a person in their solar plexus. Takes one's breath away. They're numbers that indicate a social situation in which everybody should be concerned.

Such is the number that indicates the rise in suspected overdose deaths in just one year in the piece of the map that comprises the Dufferin-Caledon region.

Anybody who attended the event to mark the International Overdose Awareness Day in Orangeville Aug. 29 heard about such numbers and such a reality in our comfortable bit of geography, said Lynette Pole-Langdon, co-chairperson of the Dufferin-Caledon Drug Strategy Committee.

The committee is a coalition of local community service agencies that strongly believe in the importance of increasing awareness and decreasing the social stigma around substance use, misuse and overdoses.

?The importance of that really can't be highlighted enough,? she said. ?Stigma does exist out there and we all have a piece to do, to try and fix that, change that.?

That's one of the key objectives of the committee, to take the wind out of the stigma that may keep somebody in need of help from seeking that help.

The Overdose Awareness Day event this year shifted from previous years when people with lived experiences spoke and there was a barbecue and distributed information.

This year's event was held at Theatre Orangeville on Aug. 29 and showed a local video made during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social shutdowns.

?We featured that video because we never had a chance to share it more broadly with the community because it was filmed during the pandemic,? Pole-Langdon said.

Previously, the video was available only by way of some social media channels.

People's eyes were opened to certain numbers spoken about by Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum, the associate medical officer of health for the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Unit.

He and other public health professionals spoke about the effects of local substance use and overdoses. The region under the umbrella of the public health unit saw an overdose increase of 75 per cent in 2023 compared to the previous year.

As many as 73 people died in the region of suspected drug poisonings.

?It was quite powerful because it gave the story of what's happening locally,? Pole-Langdon said. ?Substance use could impact any one of us.

?How many people do we know that play sports or go in for a surgery or something happens and they end up needing to take some pain medication for treatment? Sometimes, that for some folks can be the start of a journey where they need to end up self-medicating.?

And, she said, that innocence of how some people become saddled with a substance addiction is one of the reasons sharing lived experiences is important. It will go toward eroding stigma.

?Nobody wakes up one day and says I want to become a substance user, to have an addiction issue,? she said. ?Nobody does that. It's just people's circumstances and, for a lot of folks, it ends up being a coping mechanism.?