

OPIOID COALITION FIGHTS THE CRISIS

Opioids

HEALTH

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As Mendocino County struggles to deal with opioids and the dangers of overdosing, a community group called the Safe RX Mendocino Opioid Safety Coalition, composed of community members, medical professionals, educators, law enforcement, and community-based organizations, is coming together to try and provide solutions to the crisis.

The coalition was formed in the fall of 2015 so the community could bring about safe management of prescription painkillers in the county.

Because of the geographical vastness of Mendocino County, they created two sub-coalitions on the coast and inland to regularly meet. Most of their work brings together patients, law enforcement and physicians to foster education and safe practices in dealing with the opioid problem.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, opioids (including prescription opioids, heroin and fentanyl) killed more than 42,000 people in the United States in 2016, more than any year on record, while 40 percent of all opioid overdose deaths involve a prescription opioid. To help prevent opioid

Naloxone is a drug that can be used as a nasal inhaler and can counteract an opioid overdose temporarily so a person can get to a hospital. The drug is increasingly seen as a vital antidote to opioid overdoses, and U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams recently issued an advisory encouraging more people to carry the drug.

The RX coalition's goal is to get Naloxone inhalers distributed to all first responders in the county as well as any family member or friend of someone who is at risk of an overdose of opioids.

In the event of an opioid drug overdose, family members or friends would be able to spray Naloxone doses so that the vic-

OPIOIDS » PAGE 6

Kyree Klimist, program manager for Mendocino County Health and Human Services Prevention and Planning Unit, describes how those suffering an opioid overdose can use Narcan.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS PUGH — UKIAH DAILY JOURNAL



Narcan is the brand name of Naloxone, which is used to block the effects of opioids, especially in overdose.

deaths, Safe RX started increasing the supply of Naloxone (Narcan), available in the community at the beginning of 2018, to try to save the lives of people who overdose on opioids.



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FROM PAGE 1

tim has enough time to receive professional medical help.

One Naloxone box comes with two doses, and if the first dose does not have any effect, a second dose can be administered. According to Mendocino RX, patients can also receive Naloxone from the Mendocino County AIDS Viral Hepatitis Network in an injectable form for free.

Kyree Klimist is the senior program manager for Prevention and Planning with Safe RX and focuses on preventing opioid abuse and reducing opioid-related stigma in Mendocino County. She says that Mendocino County is rated fourth in the state in opioid deaths per 100,000 and other counties in the area like Lake and Humboldt are also having difficulties. She hopes that the nasal inhaler Naloxone will help addicts and make it easier for a friend or family member to give a dose to an unconscious person instead of a shot.

“We want to get it out as far reaching as we can,” Klimist said. “The

goal is to really make sure that everybody in the community who needs it has it.”

Naloxone is proving to be a popular choice because it is a stable, benign drug that works well to combat opioid overdoses, according to Klimist. She says the shelf life is two years, but it can last as long as five years. Heat and cold also don't have an effect, which means people could leave it in a car or keep it for a long time.

Members of the medical community have also decided to help make more Naloxone available. Dr. Gary Pace is the public health officer for Mendocino County and is part of the push from the medical community to try and get Naloxone out to the public. He says that many physicians became enamored with the idea of just giving a pill to solve pain without understanding the downside of easy accessibility.

“We didn't really recognize well what a problem that was going to be for individuals and society,” he said. He says that the medical community has now made it harder to prescribe opioids, maintains a maximum dose cap, and recognizes the dangers of too many

opioid prescriptions.

“All the professional organizations have come out very strongly in recommending much less use of opioids and finding other ways of having people deal with the pain,” Pace said.

He also does work around Mendocino County to help raise awareness about the dangers of opioids and how people can get treatment. Safe RX plans to have a basketball tournament on April 20 to educate kids in the community about the risks of opioid use and how the current epidemic is affecting the community.

He has also worked to make Naloxone available for all first responders so that they have it available in an emergency situation. “All the coalitions that are working on this are just trying to get Naloxone out into the community so that it is available,” Pace said.

“Sort of like with a defibrillator, you can see it in all the airports. This is another life-saving tool that can be out there for whoever needs it.”