

Why we need International Overdose Awareness Day 2018 more than ever



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Every year on August 31st communities around the world come together to mark International Overdose Awareness Day.

This year, drug overdose is attracting widespread media and public attention like never before. The opioid crisis gripping the United States is claiming lives every day and shows no signs of abating. When it comes to covering this epidemic, drug overdose is often depicted in the media in terms of statistics.

63,600. That's the total number of drug overdose deaths in the United States in 2016.

42,249. The number of those overdose deaths attributed to opioids - a 28 per cent increase on 2015.

These are harrowing numbers but of course they don't provide the full picture.

In many countries, the number of people who die from overdose is not recorded. In a way sometimes if it isn't counted, it doesn't count. The silence around overdoses in many places is deafening, at the family level but also amongst health care professionals and community leaders.

Drug overdose isn't just about calculating the toll of lives lost, each person's story is different.

Overdose cuts across nationalities, age groups, demographics and all backgrounds. It could be anyone's friend, a brother, a sister, a mum, a dad, a co-worker or a patient. While the focus in many countries including the United States is on opioids, the overdose toll from stimulants is often ignored.

Overdoses can be prevented and lives can be saved. But to achieve this we must raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of drug-related deaths. It is also vital to stimulate dialogue about evidence-based overdose prevention and drug policy – the things that are proven to work. Protecting community health and safety should be prioritised over ineffective criminal sanctions or declaring a crackdown like President Duterte in the Philippines.

These are some of the key goals underlying International Overdose Awareness Day.

From humble beginnings, the event has grown enormously in recent years. Initiated in Melbourne during a wave of heroin-related overdoses, the number of registered events world-wide has grown from 75 in 2013 to nearly 500 in 2017.

Last year, Senator for Vermont and former Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders used the day to call for a universal healthcare system. Another high-profile former Presidential

candidate, Chris Christie, proclaimed International Overdose Awareness Day an opportunity to remember individuals lost in his state of New Jersey.

In 2018 we can expect plenty of interest from policy makers once again. This is important because it will spark discussion about the policies and practices that can save lives. Take pharmacotherapy, which includes opioid replacement therapy drugs such as methadone and buprenorphine. This treatment should be widely considered best practice treatment and accessible to all who need it.

However, perceptions persist that it is just replacing one drug with another and for many people around the world access is a significant problem. Globally only around eight per cent of people using opioid drugs receive opioid substitution therapy and that is as low as three per cent in China and India. In some countries, including Russia, opioid substitution therapy is not available. Even where there is some access, dosing levels are often sub-optimal, reducing treatment effectiveness.

Another often neglected evidence-based opportunity is enhancing access to naloxone, a life-saving drug with few side effects and no abuse potential that can reverse an opioid overdose. Around the world many people using opioid drugs simply aren't aware of naloxone or how to access it. In most Asian countries naloxone is not available over the counter and even in government-run health care facilities there are shortages of the drug. If this drug was more widely available and in the hands of people likely to overdose (or witness an overdose) many lives would be saved.

Every life lost to overdose is a tragedy and more must be done to save lives. At an ongoing Australian coronial inquest, the Deputy New South Wales State Coroner made a telling observation.

"People will look back at this era and think, 'What the hell were they doing'", she said. "I often think the way we stigmatise drug users is going to look really strange with hindsight because it doesn't make a lot of sense".

International Overdose Awareness Day is an opportunity to change things for the better. From London to Moscow to Beijing and Washington people can join an event or activity near them.

For those whose lives have been touched by overdose, who are frustrated that more isn't being done or who would simply like to help - August 31st is the perfect opportunity to get involved.

You can make a difference and help deliver change around the world.

International Overdose Awareness Day 2018 events are already being registered on our [website](#). You can buy badges or wristbands online and follow us on [Facebook](#) (@InternationalOverdoseAwarenessDay), [Twitter](#) (@OverdoseDay) and [Instagram](#) (@overdoseawarenessday).