

## *Talk It Up! Column*

### Opioids and the Law

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Across our state, the number of unintentional medication and drug overdoses and overdose deaths has been rising...and Orange County is no exception. In the past year, Orange County EMS administered Naloxone (an overdose reversal medication) 80 times. While this is good news, because that means 80 lives saved, that number is more than double the number of Naloxone reversals from 5 years ago. Across the state, about 60% of unintentional opioid deaths involved heroin or other synthetic narcotics, while 40% were from commonly prescribed opioids. These numbers may seem intimidating or scary, and they are, but we also want to make sure that the people behind them are not getting lost in the statistics.

About a year ago, a teen in Chatham County died at Sugar Lake (in neighboring Chatham County). Although the official cause of death was drowning, there is a deeper answer. This youth was dropped off at the lake and left by his friends because he was under the influence of opioids, possibly dealing with an overdose, and they were all scared...too scared to call for help. What they didn't know, what might have saved this 18-year-old's life, is that they would have been protected if they called for help. In this situation, and in many others, opioid overdose deaths are preventable – we just need to know what we can do.

To that end, let us give you some suggestions and information:

At a wider, more environmental, level, the **STOP Act** was passed in NC in 2017, which targets controlled substances in a number of ways. The primary provisions are related to prescribers (medical care providers) and dispensers (pharmacies), limiting prescription amounts to avoid excess medications being given out at any one time and requiring more comprehensive tracking of prescriptions of controlled substances. However, there are also more general harm reduction provisions, including expansion of naloxone distribution to the community, as long as instruction on correct use is included. This also expanded the abilities of local Health Departments (of which OCHD is one) to provide safe syringe exchange options.

On a more individual level, the **Good Samaritan Law** in NC law protects you if you call for help in a situation like the one above. If someone you are with is overdosing from drugs or alcohol, call for medical assistance (from 911, the police or EMS). As long as you remain on scene with the person with until help comes, and then cooperate with all law and medical professionals, you will not be prosecuted for possession of small amounts of drugs, paraphernalia, or drinking underage. This law protects you even if you are on parole or probation. The victim is also protected. \*It is important to note that there are some offenses for which this law does not protect you, such as distribution or manufacturing of a controlled substance, drug trafficking, or prescription fraud.

And within your own home, **Locking Up and Safe Disposal** of prescription medications is key. There is no way to know who might be looking for unused medications. From visiting family and friends to contract workers to your own youth, it is absolutely better to be safe than sorry. Any medications in the home should be in a lock box at all times. Any unused or expired prescriptions should be safely disposed of –

Orange County law enforcement offices all have permanent drop boxes, as does Hillsborough Pharmacy. You can also watch the Safe Homes Network Facebook page for news about Rx Med Drop Off events at different community locations.

Last, if you or someone you know is using, and want help, there are programs that can help. The OC Sheriff's Office started the **Coordinated Opioid Overdose Reduction Effort (COORE)**, providing amnesty to anyone looking to get help, including safe disposal of any drugs/paraphernalia and connections with treatment and counseling services. In addition, **Freedom House Recovery Center** accepts walk-ins 24/7 for medical detoxification, evaluation, withdrawal management, and more.