

Overdose reversal medication saves lives in Brunswick County

By Sam Hickman

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BOLIVIA — More than 100 lives have been saved in the last two months in Brunswick and New Hanover counties thanks to a powerful overdose reversal medication.



Logo created by Keith White

Residents of Brunswick County had 20 unintentional medication and drug overdose deaths in 2014, a rate of 16.8 per 100,000 people. By comparison, the North Carolina average is 9.7 people per 100,000 people, according to figures from N.C. Vital Records and State Center for Health Statistics.

Robert Childs, of the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition, said these lives couldn't have been salvaged had it not been for naloxone, a synthetic drug that blocks opiate receptors in the brain and reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.

Childs spoke about the recent string of overdoses during a Brunswick Coalition meeting Monday, Dec. 21, at the county health department building in Bolivia.

"It's totally crazy," he said. "(More than) 100 lives saved in only two months."

Two weeks ago, the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office became the first agency in southeastern North Carolina to receive naloxone from the harm reduction coalition, Childs said. Additionally, Childs is working with the Boiling Spring Lakes Police Department to secure a naloxone donation.

"The more law enforcement carrying it, the more lives saved," he said. "I expect we'll have the most success (with naloxone) with the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office because of the problems here."

Childs said he's noticing a "disturbing" trend among heroin users and dealers in southeastern North Carolina.

"A few months ago, there was weak heroin circulating in our areas," he said. "The brand disappeared for a while and then dealers got their hands on an exceptionally strong batch and put the same stamp on the bags. So users were getting this really strong heroin, but thinking it was the same weak stuff they had a few months back. They're shooting it up and overdosing."

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Additionally, 60 people were hospitalized in the county as a result of unintentional medication and drug overdoses in 2013, a rate of 57.6 per 100,000 people, eclipsing the state rate of 41.1 per 100,000 people.

The Brunswick Coalition, which has been established to combat drug abuse and misuse in the county, discussed naloxone distribution and other ways to fight Brunswick County's drug problem during Monday's meeting.

The coalition is in the final stages of securing a \$10,000 Project Lazarus grant for its efforts. Project Lazarus is a secular public health nonprofit established in 2008 in response to extremely high drug overdose death rates in Wilkes County, which was four times higher than the state average at the time.

Its founder, Fred Brazon, came to Brunswick County in June 2014 because there has been a significant increase in opioid — or prescription painkiller — poisoning deaths here from 2008 to 2012, according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2012, Brunswick County had the most prescription opioid overdose deaths — 18 per 100,000 people — in the region, which includes Bladen, Columbus, New Hanover, Pender and Onslow counties.

The coalition is in the process of establishing focus groups with four local medical groups: Leland-based Batish Family Medicine, Shallotte-based Varnam Family Wellness Facility, Brunswick County Health Department and Novant Health, coalition director Tammy Brunelle said.

"All of these (entities) are interested in hosting a focus group," she said. "We want to learn more about the CSRS (Controlled Substances Reporting System). Are doctors using it? If so, how much? If not, why not? This would be a good opportunity to ask these kinds of questions."

CSRS is a statewide reporting system established by North Carolina law to improve the state's ability to identify people who abuse and misuse prescription drugs.

Coalition members have repeatedly said they'd like to see more physicians use CSRS more regularly in an effort to prevent patients from "doctor shopping," or visiting more than one physician and getting multiple prescriptions for the same narcotic.

The coalition's mission is to "promote partnerships that utilize a balanced community based approach to increase awareness, accountability and solutions to prescription and other drug misuse," according to its mission statement that was officially adopted at a September meeting.

Brunelle led an effort to secure a \$100,000 Partnership for Success grant, federal money that is distributed by individual states. Partnership for Success grants are only awarded to communities with high drug overdose rates.

As part of the Partnership for Success grant, the coalition must tell the state how it plans to educate the public and use the funds.

The coalition also is applying for a \$10,000 grant from the North Carolina Office of Rural Health and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. In the application, the county must outline how it plans to allocate the money and the coalition must address each of the “spokes” of the Project Lazarus wheel: community education, provider education, diversion and control and harm reduction.

If the coalition receives the \$10,000 Project Lazarus grant, it will use the funds to promote radio public service announcements, advertise via billboards and distribute pamphlets and brochures to dissuade people from misusing and abusing prescription medications.

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