NYC FIRST LADY, U.S. SURGEON GENERAL, DEPUTY MAYOR OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AND HEALTH COMMISSIONER DISCUSS OPIOID EPIDEMIC, MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS AT MONTEFIORE HOSPITAL

Health Department releases new general practice guidelines to reduce the risk of benzodiazepine-involved overdose

NEW YORK—At Montefiore Medical Center today, New York City First Lady Chirlane McCray, U.S Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, Deputy Mayor of Health and Human Services Dr. Herminia Palacio, and Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett discussed the nation’s and city’s opioid epidemic and the role mental health services can play in treatment. The federal and city officials were joined by Leonard Gill, who is recovering from opioid addiction. The Bronx has more people affected by the opioid epidemic than any other borough.

“The increase in opioid addiction and abuse has led to severe and devastating consequences for many of our families. In New York City alone, opioid overdoses, which are entirely preventable, kill two people every day. We lose more lives to opioid overdose than to car crashes,” said First Lady Chirlane McCray, who leads the City’s efforts on mental health and substance misuse. “It’s time to work toward real solutions at every level of government – local, state and federal – to end opioid addiction. We must work together to decrease the over-prescribing of opioids, and increase education while we expand access to other quality treatment options. We must also keep those who suffer from addiction safer with harm-reduction strategies like Naloxone. I’m honored to partner with the Surgeon General to reduce opioid dependence.”

"Addiction is a chronic illness, not a moral failing or character flaw," said Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, U.S Surgeon General. "We have to shift how we think about addiction because, until we do that, it's going to be hard for us to end this opioid epidemic and get treatment to those who need it."  

“The Administration has made tremendous investments in addressing drug addiction and overdoses, including making naloxone – medication that can prevent death from opioid overdose – available in pharmacies without a prescription,” said Deputy Mayor Dr. Herminia Palacio. “As an internal medicine physician, I learned first-hand that addiction is not an anonymous diagnosis; rather, the pain and struggle associated with addiction was in the faces and voices of so many of my patients, and gave me a better understanding of how this health condition impacted individuals, families, and communities. All New Yorkers deserve access to the best quality medical care, and as we continue to combat opioid usage citywide, we will continue our work to de-stigmatize and appropriately treat addiction issues.”
“As we tackle the opioid epidemic, we must also tackle the rising benzodiazepine-involved overdose deaths. I thank the First Lady and the Surgeon General for bringing much needed attention to this issue,” said Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett. “The Health Department’s new guidelines are part of a comprehensive effort to protect New Yorkers from the risks of prescription painkillers and heroin. We urge health care providers to follow our guidance to prescribe judiciously to reduce the risk of addiction and overdose, and to identify and offer treatment to patients with addiction. These actions are lifesaving.”

Health Department data released today highlights a 200 percent increase in the rate of benzodiazepine-involved overdose deaths from 2000 to 2014. The Epi Data Brief shows that nearly all of benzodiazepine-involved overdose deaths occur in combination with other substances, mainly central nervous system depressants, such as opioid analgesics (prescription painkillers) or alcohol. There were 301 benzodiazepine-involved overdose deaths in New York City in 2014. Of these, nearly two-thirds involved heroin (62 percent), 42 percent involved alcohol, and 39 percent involved prescription painkillers. Forty-four percent of opioid-involved overdoses involved a benzodiazepine. The full data brief can be found on nyc.gov/health.

The Health Department’s new guidelines, released earlier this month, can help health care providers reduce the risk of benzodiazepine-involved overdose. The guidelines recommend that providers prescribe these medications only when needed and only prescribe the lowest effective dose of benzodiazepines for the shortest duration – no more than two to four weeks. Additionally, the guidelines recommend that providers avoid co-prescribing benzodiazepines and prescription painkillers. The Health Department has previously issued guidelines to support judicious opioid prescribing and, last week, issued guidelines for the integration of substance use care into primary care practice.

In 2014, 1.7 million benzodiazepine prescriptions were filled by 440,000 NYC residents. Almost one-third of NYC residents who filled a benzodiazepine prescription also filled an opioid painkiller prescription in 2014. With the new guidelines, providers can take steps to recognize and reduce the risk of fatal overdose by limiting the frequency with which benzodiazepines are taken in combination with prescription painkillers, alcohol, and other central nervous system depressants that increase the risk of overdose.

“The opioid abuse crisis gripping our nation is a critical issue that we must address, and many of my constituents in the Bronx have seen firsthand the impact of opioid use on their loved ones and their community,” said Congressman Joe Crowley. "I thank the Surgeon General for joining the First Lady and the Health Commissioner to bring attention to this issue and to discuss steps to address this epidemic. These important efforts by the City and our health system must be supplemented by a real, substantive federal investment, and I will keep fighting at the federal level to make sure New York gets the resources needed to ensure better health for all."

"Addiction does not discriminate. The ongoing opioid epidemic has touched every corner of our nation, including here in New York," said Congressman Eliot Engel, a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee. "I applaud
Mayor de Blasio and First Lady McCray for their tremendous efforts to tackle the opioid crisis in New York, such as expanding access to naloxone and buprenorphine. These new guidelines represent another important step that will help those living with opioid abuse on their road to recovery.

"It's tragic that medication meant to take away pain, creates so much more through addiction. To combat the opioid epidemic, New York State law now reduces opioid prescription periods from 30 to seven days, educates doctors on pain management and increases services offered to those suffering from addiction. I applaud the City for recognizing the importance of this issue and for helping fight this serious crisis," said State Senator Jeff Klein, Leader of the Independent Democratic Conference.

"The Bronx has the highest death toll from heroin overdoses in the whole city; we have to find a way to help people who are struggling with addiction before it is too late. Judicious prescribing is one way this Administration has focused on fighting the opioid epidemic. The availability of Naloxone, the overdose antidote, is another way. We are saving lives and I am hopeful that we will eventually win this war against opioid addiction," said Council Member Andrew Cohen, Chair of Committee on Mental Health.

“I applaud the First Lady and Surgeon General for their efforts to raise awareness about the opioid epidemic we have in our city,” said Council Member James Vacca. “Opioid addiction is a public health crisis that must be addressed comprehensively. There is no silver bullet when dealing with addiction, but measures such as more restrictive prescriptions and the increased availability of naloxone will save lives.”

In 2014, the rate of benzodiazepine-involved overdose deaths was highest among White New Yorkers (8.8 per 100,000) – more than double the rate for Latinos (3.4 per 100,000) and more than five times the rate for Black New Yorkers (1.6 per 100,000). Residents of Staten Island had the highest rate of benzodiazepine-involved overdose deaths (10.1 per 100,000), almost three times the rates of Brooklyn (3.6 per 100,000) and Manhattan (3.5 per 100,000) residents, and the overdose death rate in Staten Island increased annually by an average of 15 percent from 2000 to 2014.

The City has made mental health awareness and access to services a top priority. With ThriveNYC, an unprecedented set of 54 initiatives, the Health Department is raising awareness about the need to seek help while addressing the increase in unintentional opioid-involved overdose deaths. ThriveNYC plans to add more than 1,000 new providers over the next three years who are trained and authorized to prescribe buprenorphine, a lifesaving medication that treats opioid addiction by stopping cravings and withdrawal symptoms. The City’s efforts will focus on expanding the number of primary care physician practices certified to prescribe buprenorphine. In addition, the City will expand access to harm reduction services and establish a nonfatal overdose response system to provide individuals who have experienced a nonfatal overdose with overdose prevention education, naloxone, and linkage to ongoing care. The Administration also announced an expansion of the City’s naloxone distribution program to distribute naloxone kits at no cost to opioid overdose prevention programs in communities with high rates of opioid overdose deaths.
Last year, Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett signed a standing order that significantly increased the availability of naloxone. Today, naloxone is available for purchase at more than 690 pharmacies across the city, including all chain pharmacies. The standing order built upon the de Blasio Administration’s efforts to increase access to naloxone in New York City.

For more information on ThriveNYC, visit https://thrivenyc.cityofnewyork.us.

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