

Humboldt County opioid trends promising, but still ‘ways to go,’ health care workers say



Opioid prescriptions in Humboldt County have trended steadily downward over the past few years while opioid-related overdose deaths decreased in 2018, according to state Department of Public Health statistics. (AP Photo/Patrick Sison, File)

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Opioid prescriptions in Humboldt County have trended steadily downward over the past few years while opioid-related overdose deaths decreased in 2018, according to state Department of Public Health statistics.

A number of other areas related to the ongoing national opioid crisis have shown improvement at the county level, including the number of people using more than 90 morphine milligram equivalents of opioids and the number of prescriptions for buprenorphine, which is used to treat opioid addiction.

But most of the statistics — including about 15 opioid-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people and about 777 opioid prescriptions per 1,000 residents — still place the county far above state averages.

“We have made progress, but we’ve absolutely got a ways to go,” said Mary Meengs, a local family medicine doctor who works for RX Safe Humboldt, a community coalition working to combat the prescription pain pill issue.

The Times-Standard [reported earlier this month](#) on Humboldt County-specific opioid statistics from 2006 to 2012, drawing from Drug Enforcement Administration data published by the Washington Post.

More than 70 million prescription pain pills entered the area during those years. It’s a statistic that figured to about 76 pills per person each year, which ranked Humboldt County tied-for-eight among all 58 counties in California.

But in the years since, health care workers have responded, aggressively tackling the issue. RX Safe Humboldt has spent much of the past decade educating private practice doctors about safe prescription practices.

According to the latest data from Rx Safe Humboldt, in the third quarter of 2018, the total population age-adjusted rate of opioid prescriptions per 1,000 residents had dropped to 777.51 in Humboldt County, down from a peak of about 1,300 in 2011 but still above state rates, which fluctuated between 500 and 600 over a similar span. Humboldt County’s total population age-adjusted rate of opioid-related overdose deaths for the third quarter of 2018 — 15.28 — was just under three times as high as the state’s rate, but lower than in years past.

The subjective nature of pain has often led doctors to make quick judgment calls when prescribing pill counts to patients, RX Safe Humboldt members said. Part of the training involves learning how to resist patients who pressure doctors into prescribing them more pills. But that doesn’t mean opioids are evil, nor should doctors treat them as verboten drugs, said Rosemary Den Ouden, RX Safe Humboldt’s chief executive officer.

“Safe prescribing does not mean no prescribing,” Den Ouden stressed. “There are appropriate situations to prescribe an opioid.”

And at the end of the day, prescription pain pills provide relief, she added — making education and training even more vital for practicing doctors.

In April, members of RX Safe held a Humboldt Opioid Summit to promote prevention and treatment of addiction.

Slowly but surely, awareness is improving, but progress isn’t necessarily linear, Meengs said, and combating opioids alone won’t solve the issue.

“Putting emphasis on one drug is a total whack-a-mole exercise,” Meengs said.

The 2006-2012 data reported earlier this month by the Times-Standard included a breakdown of the top five opioid distributors of the pills that entered Humboldt County.

The McKesson Corporation, a multi-billion dollar American pharmaceutical company, accounted for more than 33 million pills.

Cardinal Health, a multinational health care company, distributed more than 2 million pills in the county over the seven-year range. Last week, a number of documents related to the company became public.

One, a transcript of Cardinal Health's legal counsel's deposition earlier this year, includes a lawyer questioning the counsel on whether the company wants to "ensure that it does what it can to prevent" harm toward the public.

"I don't know that Cardinal owes a duty to the public regarding that," the counsel responded.

Responses like this aren't new for members of RX Safe Humboldt, who agreed distributors played a major role in fueling the epidemic. But RX Safe's work is on a local level. Empowering people in the community to address the problem is the fight on the ground in Humboldt County, they said.

"If you stopped every opioid pill and every gram of heroin from coming into the county, you wouldn't fix the problem," Meengs said. "Then you've just got meth. Then you've just got alcohol, or whatever."

Community groups have rallied around a sociological approach to the crisis. Jessica Smith, the new executive director of the Humboldt Area Center for Harm Reduction, says "addiction" is a medical term, not a single-walled barrier to normalcy.

"When folks are using, our goal is to help them through any positive change they want to see," said Smith, who recently succeeded Brandie Wilson as HACHR's chief. "We're focused on a large group of people who face a number of problems, including homelessness."

Expecting people to first get clean before piecing their lives back together ends up serving no one, Smith explained. Ultimately, helping a drug user improve their life is the same process as solving a decades-long opioids issue: It goes step by step.

"It's great that opioids are going down," she said. "But you take addiction away, there's still a lot of people who need help. There are still barriers to living a normal life."

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