

Retraction Request for Dangerous Drug Misinformation

Issued 8/8/2021 by a concerned group of health professionals, first responders, public health researchers, drug journalists, and people with lived experience

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Dear writer(s) and editor(s):

We are writing to you as more than 400 drug experts, including health professionals, first responders, public health researchers, drug journalists, and people with lived experience. We are writing to request a retraction and correction of your recent article which perpetuates a myth: that casual contact with potent synthetic opioids such as fentanyl poses a health risk to first responders. This is dangerous misinformation that can cause harm both to people who use opioids and to members of the law enforcement community. We greatly appreciate your cooperation in addressing this error. Please see below/attached for additional information and our names/credentials/positions.

The American College of Medical Toxicology and the American Academy of Clinical Toxicology convened an expert task force to review data on fentanyl exposure risks and the two groups jointly released a [position statement](#) in 2017, which concluded that “incidental dermal absorption is very unlikely to cause opioid toxicity,” and “toxicity cannot occur from simply being in proximity to the drug.”

In 2018, an [article](#) debunking this myth was published in STAT News by two renowned medical toxicologists. They underscore that multiple agencies declared that brief skin contact with fentanyl and related compounds does not produce toxic effects. However, the spread of this misinformation from news reports to social media continues, and was documented in a 2020 [study](#). Thus, it is not surprising that a 2021 [study](#) found belief in this myth was nearly ubiquitous among law enforcement officials. There are three harms that result from this misinformation.

First, the misinformation exacerbates stigmatization of people who need support in the midst of a public health crisis. Second and most crucially, the disinformation may delay a timely overdose response, including the administration of naloxone, while bystanders wait for first responders to arrive, and first responders waste time donning unnecessary personal protective equipment. Finally, first responders may suffer emotional trauma if they believe that passive exposures put their lives at risk, even if that belief itself does not correspond to reality.

Based on our experience reading hundreds of similar news articles, we recognize that a reliance on reports from law enforcement officials, rather than medical experts in toxicology, often contributes to spread of incorrect information. We implore you to avoid this mistake in future drug reporting. [Changing The Narrative](#) offers valuable knowledge and guidance for journalists on this myth and a range of other drug reporting topics. It also provides contact information for

verified experts on each topic. After retracting and correcting this article, we hope you will explore this website further. We offer the following suggested language for your correction to this article.

Correction: Casual contact with fentanyl is not a health risk to overdose responders

We previously published an article which stated that casual contact with fentanyl can result in harm to overdose responders. This view is not supported by medical experts, including the American College of Medical Toxicology. They agree that bystanders and first responders can safely respond to a suspected overdose without concern that they will be harmed by accidentally inhaling powdered fentanyl or absorbing it through skin contact. Effective overdose response measures, such as the administration of naloxone (AKA Narcan) to reverse an opioid overdose, should not be delayed. Anyone can obtain naloxone, the opioid overdose antidote, and use it to save a life. You can learn more about naloxone and where to access it in your state at NaloxoneForAll.org.

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