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## Liquid fentanyl raises host of challenges: Goldlist



THE CANADIAN PRESS



A police force in Ontario is revamping the way officers handle street drugs after learning that a substance seized during a drug raid was liquid fentanyl, a highly powerful opioid that can be easily absorbed through the skin.

Hamilton police Det. Const. Adam

Brown said he and other officers came across a vial of the drug during a raid in May, but at the time they believed it contained GHB – also known as a date-rape drug.

The members of the force's vice and drug unit wore protective gear to handle all the substances they came across during the raid, Brown said, which also included hash, marijuana, cocaine and oxycodone pills.

Police sent a sample of the suspected GHB to Health Canada for testing and the results showed it was actually liquid fentanyl.

“I was never afraid that if I got a little of this stuff on my skin that I would ever be worried about death – that was never a concern for me, now it is,” Brown said. “It's a complete game changer for us and it's scary because you don't know what concentration this is.”

Brown said Health Canada notified Hamilton police about its analysis in July, but he didn't realize its significance until after he returned from a recent conference about fentanyl hosted by Calgary police.

“It was from that conference that I put two and two together and reached out to Health Canada and an RCMP officer,” Brown said. “It turns out fentanyl had never been seen in a liquid solution on the illicit market in Canada.”

Liquid fentanyl is believed to be more powerful than the powder form of the drug, which is believed to have led to more than 1,000 fentanyl-related deaths across the country, although Canada lacks a central database with up-to-date numbers of overdose deaths.

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Hamilton police are currently examining the force's drug-handling protocols and are set to revamp how front-line officers deal with unknown substances in wake of this recent discovery.

Front-line officers will likely wear eye protection and long, thick sleeves, two pairs of nitrile or latex gloves and a respiratory apparatus once the review is completed, Brown said.

Hamilton police are also talking to other forces across the country about carrying around naloxone, an antidote that can be used to reduce or reverse the effects of opioid exposure.

In September, the RCMP announced its front-line officers would begin carrying naloxone nasal spray after several officers became sick due to accidental exposure to powder fentanyl. Vancouver police said its front-line officers would also be carrying naloxone spray.

David Juurlink, a medical toxicologist with the University of Toronto, believes all first responders in Canada – be they police officers, firefighters or paramedics – should carry naloxone, both for themselves for accidental exposure or for users who have overdosed.

While Juurlink applauds the precautions police will be using for fentanyl in general, regardless of its form, he thinks ``the prospect of an officer being accidentally poisoned by skin contact with liquid fentanyl seems like a very remote possibility."

``I think it's much more likely that people would be exposed through inhalation of fentanyl powder that is accidentally dispersed."

Fentanyl overdoses have become a major problem in British Columbia and Alberta, but experts said the drug has been making its way east.

The majority of the illicit fentanyl in Canada, Brown said, comes from China, usually ordered online and delivered through mail or courier. Pharmacy robberies for fentanyl patches also still remain a big problem, Brown said.

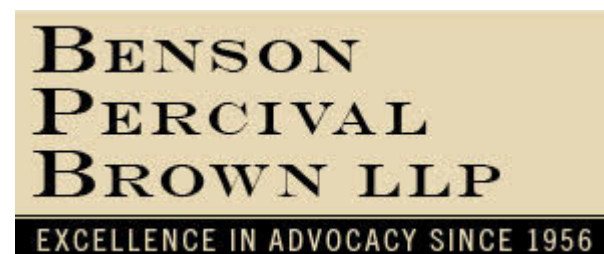
Juurlink said Mexico has also become a fentanyl hub as well as domestic production.

He said it's unclear how many deaths occur in Ontario due to fentanyl overdose because the data doesn't exist, but said the country as a whole is on track for upwards of 3,000 opioid-related deaths this year.

Over the past year, Hamilton officers have come across a mix of fentanyl and heroin called ``popcorn," but Brown said liquid fentanyl is so new that they don't yet know how people may be using it on the street or how dangerous it really is.

In an interview with [AdvocateDaily.com](http://AdvocateDaily.com), Toronto criminal lawyer [Jordana Goldlist](#) says there is no question that fentanyl can be far more dangerous than other drugs available on the street.

“I have had cases where heroin was cut with it and I have also heard that it is being pressed and stamped to look like Oxycontin and Percocet,” she tells the online legal news service. “Whether liquid is more or less dangerous than the powder form is questionable. Obviously, both are easily tampered with and less easily measured than the patches, making it difficult for users to gauge dose and police to identify.”





Goldlist, principal of [JHG Criminal Law](#), says fentanyl is not like meth or some of the other street drugs out there, which are cooked up in an illegal lab using household products and commercial chemicals.

“Dealers don't make fentanyl. It is acquired with a prescription, whether obtained legally or fraudulently, and it is distributed by a pharmacist or stolen from a pharmacy. If the government really wanted to stop this drug from flooding the black market, it could.”

Goldlist says no one is asking questions about the regulation of the drug and why the government has approved its use in the marketplace.

“What is most unfortunate is that no one is holding the pharmaceutical companies responsible for putting the drug on the market,” she says. “And while I’m not suggesting the companies are doing anything illegal, the question really needs to be asked about why this drug is available at all.

“If the government really wanted to stop this drug from flooding the black market, it could. It doesn't because Big Pharma has deep pockets and long arms that reach political campaigns.”

Goldlist says the reality is the criminal justice system does not reduce drug use.

“It never has and it never will; it is not designed to,” she says. “People will always sell drugs and people will always use drugs – the system does nothing to interfere with this.

“Users go to jail, where they do not get treatment. Dealers are sent to the same jails as the users and they are not given skills or job training to allow for a change in occupation. Instead, they get criminal records, which reduce their ability to earn income legally. This obviously results in dealers continuing to sell drugs to support themselves because no one will hire them with one (or more) convictions for drug dealing. This reality is why I say the system is designed to keep people stuck.”

– With files from [AdvocateDaily.com](#)


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