

Title: A Pilot Study Assessing Client Understanding and Use of Fentanyl Test Strips for Harm Reduction

Authors & Affiliates: Aleeya A. Barrolle, Pharm.D. Candidate [1]; Kelly N. Gable, Pharm.D., BCPP [1,2]; Nathaniel Dell, AM, MSW, LCSW [2]. 1. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) School of Pharmacy, 2. Places for People St. Louis, Missouri.

Background and Purpose: The CDC has reported a sharp increase in overdose deaths from illicitly manufactured fentanyls (IMFs) occurring between April 2020 and April 2021 in the United States (US). Approximately four in ten deaths involved stimulants. Fentanyl testing strips (FTS), when used to directly test drug products, can be a powerful harm reduction tool, promoting safer drug use behaviors and reducing overall overdose risk. This pilot study assessed treatment-seeking service users' knowledge and understanding of IMFs and motivation to use FTS as a method of harm reduction to prevent overdose.

Methods: Clients actively engaged in residential-based or office-based treatment for a substance use disorder were recruited from a community mental health center in the midwestern US to complete a harm reduction-focused survey. With permission, survey questions were adapted from research conducted at Brown School of Public Health. Eligibility criteria included clients aged 18 to 89 with self-reported drug use in the past year (e.g., heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine). A 20-question survey was administered verbally by a student investigator both in-person and via phone. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from both SIUE and Places for People.

Results: Thirty clients completed the survey during the fall of 2021. Of respondents, 80% agreed that in Missouri, IMFs cause more overdoses than heroin. Seventy-three percent indicated concern about a friend overdosing due to IMFs, but only 53% expressed concern about personal risk for overdose. Most (73%) would like to be able to detect if there is fentanyl in their drug before use, but only 17% indicated that they feel confident in their ability to use FTS.

Conclusions: Many respondents who were receiving services for past-year substance use lacked understanding of how to use FTS for harm reduction. Clients who primarily use non-opioid/stimulant drug products are at even greater risk for IMF overdose and would likely benefit the most from increased access and education surrounding the use of FTS. Our healthcare system must rapidly continue to explore and expand upon overdose prevention efforts, including access to FTS, as urgent action is needed to reduce the continued rise in overdose deaths in the US.