

NEWS BITES

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Updates From Congress and Federal Agencies

- On January 16, 2020, the United States Senate passed, by unanimous consent, a bipartisan bill to extend the Drug Enforcement Administration's temporary scheduling order related to fentanyl by 15 months. The Temporary Reauthorization and Study of the Emergency Scheduling of Fentanyl Analogs Act keeps the current scheduling order in place until May 2021.
- The Drug Enforcement Administration recently released a strategic planning guide to prevent drug use among college students. The publication provides a road map for college and university-based prevention professionals to address campus-wide drug misuse issues. The full guide can be found at <https://www.campusdrugprevention.gov/sites/default/files/Strategic%20Planning%20Guide%20%28Final-Online%29%20%281%29.pdf>.
- The Drug Enforcement Administration has announced new efforts to improve access to medication-assisted treatment, particularly in rural areas where persons suffering with opioid use disorder have limited options. Under the new proposal, narcotic treatment program registrants authorized to dispense narcotic drugs to treat opioid dependence would now be authorized to implement a "mobile component" to their registration, eliminating the need for a separate DEA registration.

What is Happening in the States

Arizona: According to statistics from the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Mexican cartels are flooding the US with cheap, high-quality methamphetamine. DEA seizure numbers show that Arizona CPB confiscated more than 31 thousand pounds of methamphetamine in 2019, compared to just under 12 thousand pounds in 2017.

California: Democratic State Senator Scott Wiener wants to implement legislation that would make public funds available for programs that provide financial incentives for persons who stop using drugs. [CA Senate Bill 888](#) would expand use of state programs that use vouchers or small cash prizes to motivate people to discontinue their drug use.

Maryland: Legislation is making its way through the state Assembly that, if passed, would enact more stringent restrictions on kratom, a substance that has similar properties to addictive opioids. [MD House Bill 283](#) categorizes kratom as being among the most dangerous controlled substances, adding it to the same schedule as heroin, LSD, ecstasy, and the hallucinogen peyote.

Minnesota: Even as opioid prescriptions in the state have dropped dramatically, the state is pressing forward with plans to implement penalties against certain physicians that overprescribe opioid pain medications. New state law requires the sending of reports to providers about their rates of prescription, and those with high rates risk being removed from the various state health programs' provider lists.

New Jersey: [Senate Bill 3240](#), aimed at combatting opioid addiction, has been signed into law. It requires pharmacists to educate patients on how to safely discard unused, unwanted, or expired drugs and needles. Pharmacists must also make available a way to dispose of those drugs through a pharmacy drop-box or kiosk or a Drug Deactivation System Product.

Pennsylvania: Once signed by the governor, [Senate Bill 432](#) will require Medicaid managed care organizations to contact the Attorney General if they believe a controlled substance was unlawfully prescribed or dispensed. The risk of not being in compliance with laws like this one is prompting many doctors to refuse to prescribe opioids to patients.

Utah: The state department of health is looking for vendors to supply strips that will allow users to test their drugs for fentanyl, the dangerous opioid often found in varying amounts in other drugs.

West Virginia: Thanks to a new health department initiative, persons addicted to opioids will soon be able to avail themselves of free transportation to treatment centers around the state.

What's New In Substance Use Disorder Treatment

- The American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio is looking to represent inmates who have been denied opioid treatment during incarceration. The correctional system has, until now, been slow to implement medication-assisted treatment programs. That may soon change however, depending on the success of efforts such as the one occurring in Ohio through the ACLU. To read the full article on this topic, visit <https://www.vindy.com/news/local-news/2020/01/aclu-wants-to-hear-from-inmates-denied-opioid-treatment/>.
- According to a recent report from the Department of Health and Human Services, many of the areas hit hardest by the opioid epidemic still lack access to the addiction treatment drug buprenorphine. The federal government has expanded the list of providers who can prescribe buprenorphine, but estimates indicate that as many as 40 percent of counties in the United States have no authorized providers of buprenorphine as an addiction treatment. For more information on this topic, visit <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-12-17-00240.asp>.
- An insurer in West Virginia recently announced that its members will now have access to a technology-enabled opioid use disorder program that is one of the first of its kind in the country. Though this new program, members will be able to meet on demand with staff and counselors through their tablets and smartphones. Patients can access this benefit through a self-referral process and will receive individualized treatment plans. For more information, visit https://www.herald-dispatch.com/news/highmark-launches-technology-enabled-opioid-treatment-program-in-west-virginia/article_fe80e099-4567-5470-bb7b-a8f59c07e9ef.html.
- A recent study published in the online journal *Digital Medicine* overwhelmingly found that virtual assistants such as Alexa fail to provide useful information in response to questions about help with addiction. The most common response to such queries was one of confusion, and researchers concluded that today's virtual assistants offer little to no assistance for those seeking help with a substance use disorder. For more information on the study, visit <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/924840>.
- Researchers at Duke University have been working on the creation of a vaccine that blocks the effects of cocaine. The results of a new study, published in the journal *Vaccines*, show that a formulation tested in mice effectively negated the effects of cocaine by inducing an antibody response that blocks the effect of the drug, thereby preventing the euphoric high associated with cocaine. This is important research, as there are currently no available therapies to treat cocaine addiction. For more information on the study, visit <https://www.bizjournals.com/triangle/news/2020/02/20/duke-experts-work-to-take-away-the-high-from.html>.

Stories of Interest from the Field

- The renowned microbiologist Frank Plummer has become a subject in a clinical trial to investigate whether brain implants can treat alcohol use disorder. After years of groundbreaking work, and alcohol abuse, Dr. Plummer was diagnosed with liver failure. He tried rehab, support groups, medications, and counseling with no positive results. After numerous relapses, he went looking for another solution and was eventually recruited for an experimental procedure using DBS or deep-brain stimulation for patients with treatment-resistant alcohol use disorder. After undergoing the procedure, Dr. Plummer and his surgeon both reported an improvement in alcohol cravings, but both caution that this research is in very early stages and that even after undergoing such a procedure, patients should continue conventional therapies for alcohol addiction.
- A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Internal Medicine* found that hospitals can reduce their opioid prescription numbers by lowering default prescription volumes in Electronic Health Records (EHR). During the study, researchers manually altered the default EHR setting for opioid prescription volumes at the emergency departments of two California hospitals every four weeks. They then analyzed the prescribing trends and found that a lower default setting resulted in fewer pills prescribed. To read the full study, visit <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/article-abstract/2759133?resultClick=1>.
- In a stated effort to stop the addiction cycle and encourage drug users to seek treatment, an Indiana prosecutor has decided to start charging people who experience a drug overdose. The likely charge will be possession of a controlled substance, a level 6 felony punishable by up to 2 ½ years in jail. The hope is that those who overdose will plead guilty to the charge and be placed in drug rehabilitation programs. The prosecutor acknowledges that there are obstacles such as an overdose victim deciding to take his or her chances in front of a judge rather than be placed into treatment. The focus of the effort is not to criminalize drug use but rather to use the tools law enforcement already has to funnel people with a substance use disorder into treatment.
- Health officials in New York City recently announced the opening of the city's first support center for persons who have had contact with the criminal justice system but who pose no threat to the public. The center is designed to help bridge the gap between stabilization services and people who may be a threat to themselves. Such facilities are alternatives to emergency rooms for individuals struggling with mental health and substance abuse needs, which may not be met in an emergency room or a jail cell. By the end of this year there will be two centers in the city that will have the capacity to serve about 2,400 people per year.

Other Drugs of Concern

- The director of the RAND Drug Policy Research Center recently indicated that it could take years to eliminate the black market for marijuana products. Washington state, for example, has a thriving black market for marijuana products as it is estimated that about one half of the recreational and medical marijuana consumed by that states' residents is acquired illegally and not through legal state-run dispensaries established three years ago. For their part, federal officials say that although the opioid epidemic has been front and center, federal agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration are not ignoring marijuana violations.
- A new and potentially dangerous drug is popping up on gas station shelves across the country. The substance is called Tianaa and is commonly advertised as a replacement for kratom, which has recently faced increased regulation in many states. Tianaa's main ingredient is tianeptine, a highly addictive synthetic drug that offers users a euphoric high and strong withdrawal symptoms. Tianeptine is not currently regulated by the Food and Drug Administration but lawmakers in at least one state, Alabama, have drafted legislation that would make tianeptine a Schedule II drug. To read the legislation, visit <https://www.cbs42.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/81/2020/01/HB6-int.pdf>.
- The substance ibogaine, a hallucinogenic root derived from an African shrub, was a topic of conversation at the recently held World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The biotech company ATAI, along with its partners and investors, told the billionaires' gathering that they are preparing for a trial of a synthetic form of ibogaine for drug addiction treatment. Researchers and clinicians have long been searching for substance use disorder treatments that are not themselves addictive, and unlike today's commonly used methadone (which itself is an opioid with addictive qualities), ibogaine is known as an addiction interrupter and appears to reset the brain chemistry involved with dependency. Some clinics have been using the substance to treat severe addiction with positive results, and studies have indicated that it can reduce withdrawal symptoms, perhaps even more effectively than methadone.

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