

Submitting an Op-Ed

In addition to publishing letters to the editor, most news sources also print opinion-editorials (Op-Ed). Think of an op-ed as being more of an essay expressing your opinion rather than a letter. You will likely spend more time writing your op-ed than you would on a letter to the editor. It helps if you write about an issue that is currently in the news (for example: a new report showing a huge rise in fentanyl-laced heroin overdoses, or a tragic overdose death in your city). Editors are also generally more likely to print your op-ed if you write about a local issue. Aim for your piece to be between 550 and 650 words.

Sample Letters to the Editor

Thank You For Heroin Coverage

The Albuquerque Journal (North)
Sunday, April 13, 2008

Thank you for your coverage of the harm reduction programs in New Mexico, particularly the distribution of the life-saving medication, Narcan, which reverses opioid overdose ("Treating Heroin Addicts Daunting: Overdose antidote just one method of tackling heroin abuse in places like Rio Arriba," April 6). I've lost two close friends to accidental drug overdose in the past few years and, while I still grieve their passing, I maintain hope for a future where all states embrace smart and more effective public health policies that can help prevent this needless loss of life.

Last year, New Mexico became the first state in the nation to implement a law that protects witnesses from drug possession charges when they call 911 to save the life of an overdose victim. Most fatal overdoses occur in the presence of friends and family but individuals are afraid to call 911 out of the fear of arrest for drug law violations. Calling 911 should be an automatic response for anyone witnessing a drug-related overdose— and never delayed by hesitation arising from fear of the criminal justice system.

Thank you to our leaders in New Mexico who embrace effective public health approaches to drug problems; so many of our friends and family members' lives depend on it.

Julie Roberts, Santa Fe

Education needed to stop overdoses

The Tucson Citizen
January 30, 2009

Heath Ledger's posthumous Oscar nomination, falling on the one-year anniversary of his death, is a wake-up call to all of us. We need to start talking about the preventable tragedy of overdose and the need for more education and outreach to people at risk. We, as a country, have been far too silent about this hidden crisis for far too long.

We should be talking about how, according to the Centers for Disease Control, alcohol and drug overdose are the number one injury-related cause of death among people ages 35 to 54. We should be talking about the more than 22,000 Americans who die every year from accidental overdose and that the majority of those deaths occur among people using prescription drugs.

Maybe we don't talk about it because of the terrible and persistent stigma associated with fatal drug overdose. Silence and stigma kill people - just ask the earliest activists for AIDS awareness and prevention. Maybe if people knew about the lifesaving drug naloxone - which immediately reverses opioid overdose and is cheap, easy to use and effective - they'd feel more comfortable talking about overdose prevention.

Let's take this opportunity to finally start a conversation about the many ways we can prevent more deaths in the future. Let's bring the topic out in the open so we can finally work toward putting an end to this tragedy. We can't bring Heath Ledger back, but we can make sure his death was not in vain by finally bringing overdose prevention into the spotlight where it belongs.

Meghan Ralston and Heather Edney
co-chairs, the Los Angeles County Overdose Prevention Task Force

Reacting to substance abuse

The Washington Post
November 9, 2009

The grievous overdose deaths profiled in "The damage done" illustrate a critical need for more sensible drug policies that would empower individuals who witness a drug overdose to administer naloxone and summon emergency help.

Naloxone quickly reverses a heroin or prescription opioid overdose and has been used by emergency responders and doctors for decades. When naloxone is available to someone at risk of a heroin overdose, a friend or family member can administer it.

Annually in the United States, more people die from accidental overdose than from homicide or AIDS. Legislation introduced in Congress by Rep. Donna F. Edwards (D-Md.) would create a coordinated federal response to overdose deaths that includes expanded access to naloxone. Those who struggle with addiction deserve to have every available tool to survive an overdose and get a second chance at life.

Grant Smith, Washington

Sample Op-Ed

Alternet

**New Maryland 'Good Samaritan' Law Falls Short:
It Should Never Be a Crime to Call 911**

by Irina Alexander

October 6, 2009

Two people die almost every day in Md. of a drug-related overdose. Witnesses frequently cite fear of police involvement as the primary reason for hesitating to call 911.

Pale face, vomit, slow breathing. She's not looking too good... should we call for help? There's no way they'd let her off without jail time. Let's just let her sleep it off for now, she should be fine in the morning.

Two people die almost every day in Maryland of a drug-related overdose. Consistently, witnesses cite fear of police involvement as the primary reason for hesitating to call for help.

On October 1, Maryland enacted a "Good Samaritan" law that means calling 911 during an alcohol or other drug-related overdose can be used as a mitigating factor in criminal prosecution. However, the legislation was watered-down so that Maryland law enforcement continues to have the right to show up at the scene of a drug overdose, often before an ambulance, and arrest multiple people for drug possession.

Although Maryland has taken a tiny step in the right direction, the decision to prioritize criminalizing drug use over saving lives is appalling. The House recently heard testimony from Dr. Daniel Reardon, whose son died of an alcohol overdose on

the University of Maryland- College Park campus because everyone decided to let him “sleep it off” on a couch until his brain ceased functioning, from Lana Dreyfuss, whose friends abandoned her on a bathroom floor while she overdosed on heroin, and from Alise Boule, a Howard County emergency room nurse who noted how often people are scared to call for help or take the victim to the hospital. Yet, the judiciary committee refused to give in, citing concerns about “sending the wrong message.”

Since when has “the wrong message” been one of responsibility and concern for human life? Maryland needs to have smarter public policies that focus on preventing deaths rather than arresting people for small amounts of drugs. There is plenty of time to intervene and prevent an overdose fatality -- most overdose deaths do not occur until one to three hours after the initial injection or ingestion of drugs.

While the Good Samaritan policy received letters of support from Maryland residents and organizations like the Maryland Association of County Health Officers, the National African American Drug Policy Coalition, the National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence, and the Office of the Public Defender, the only opposition to the bill came from the Fraternal Order of Police. Richard Bergin, representative for Baltimore County’s F.O.P., states that people who use drugs have no concept of the notion of “good faith.” Ismael V. Canales, President of the Prince George’s County F.O.P., is convinced that the bill “does nothing but provide just another layer of protection for those that choose to break the law.” These are astonishing generalizations that dehumanize and devalue the lives of an entire group of people. The mothers and fathers of people who use drugs would no doubt disagree about the value of their children’s lives.

Last year, University of Maryland-College Park passed a referendum asking students if they would be more inclined to call emergency services during an alcohol or other drug related emergency if the campus adapted a Good Samaritan policy. Ninety-three percent of over 3,000 students who voted said they would. It is time that Maryland starts appreciating the irreplaceable value of a life by implementing a comprehensive Good Samaritan policy.