

Close to Home: A tool to prevent opioid overdose deaths

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BILL REMAK IS FOUNDER AND CEO OF THE CALIFORNIA HEPATITIS C TASK FORCE. | July 12, 2018, 12:07AM



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As the nation struggles to address the devastating opioid crisis, we need all available tools to help educate the public about the dangers of opioid misuse and to help prevent death and injury from opioid overdose. California is taking an important step in that direction as it considers legislation to achieve both goals.

If passed, Assembly Bill 2760 by Assemblyman Jim Wood, D-Healdsburg, would help curb opioid deaths by requiring medical prescribers to also include information on opioid abuse and overdose risks, as well as a prescription for naloxone. Naloxone blocks the effects of opioids on the central nervous system to help prevent opioid overdose death.

AB 2760 would specifically apply when physicians prescribe higher-dose opioid medication and/or prescribe opioid drugs to patients with a history of substance abuse.

The need for AB 2760 is clear. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that between 21 and 29 percent of patients prescribed opioids abuse them. And in 2015, an estimated 47.9 opioid prescriptions per 100 persons were written in California. Taken together, these statistics mean that potentially 4 million Californians abuse opioid prescriptions — a number that is nothing short of alarming.

Everyone must have a second chance to walk away from an accidental overdose or unintended event that could leave their health permanently affected. California has a chance, through the passage of AB 2760, to be a leader on helping curb overdose deaths and set an example for other states across the country.

Under AB 2760, patients and their families would have the option to fill the naloxone prescription so they have it on hand should the patient, or someone sharing their home, accidentally overdose or misuse their prescription. Home availability of naloxone could mean the difference between life and death because while paramedics and many in law enforcement now carry naloxone, there is no guarantee they could respond to an overdose call in time.

The National Institutes of Health has begun evaluating co-prescription of naloxone, and early findings indicate that providing naloxone to patients taking opioids, particularly among those taking higher doses for chronic pain, resulted in fewer opioid-related emergency room visits. Passage of AB 2760 is an important first step in creating similar results in California and decreasing opioid overdose deaths statewide.

In 2016, nearly 2,000 Californians died from opioid overdose not related to heroin. Future loss of life from opioid overdose can be prevented with the education and tools AB 2760 would provide to patients and their families and caregivers. We hope the Legislature and the governor will pass AB 2760 when the bill is before them.

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