

# Overdose

**Note: The following scenario is fictional. It deals with a current issue that affects all of us. For those who have lost a friend or loved one, who know someone struggling with opioid addiction, or who are themselves dealing with addiction, please view this scenario as an effort to address a serious health problem with sensitivity and care.**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, America experienced a significant increase in fatal opioid overdoses. Between 1999 and 2017, the number of annual deaths by opioid overdose increased from approximately 8,000 to 48,000. Although disputed, many link the growth in opioid addiction to the widespread prescription of oxycodone for medical pain relief. The availability of the powerful synthetic opioid, Fentanyl, is another contributing factor.

Currently, there is only one available remedy for opioid overdoses. Naloxone, marketed as Narcan, can be administered by injection or nasal spray. For some overdose victims treated quickly enough, Narcan can prevent brain injury and death. Forty plus states including Virginia have made legislative moves to make Narcan more available to the public.

Despite the growing availability of Narcan, however, overdose fatalities continue to rise. Why? One explanation could be that an increased sense of safety can simultaneously bring about an increase in risky behavior—a phenomenon some have called a “moral hazard.” And indeed, some recent controversial studies suggest that higher rates of fatal opioid overdose can be found in areas with public Narcan accessibility.

In response to the rising level of fatal opioid overdoses, a national foundation is donating thousands of Narcan kits to public and private universities. You serve in your university’s Student Government, and you must decide whether or not to accept Narcan on your campus. As you hear various perspectives, be curious about the ethical questions (8KQ) your team must address while deciding.

## **Emergency Room Provider**

Overdoses of Fentanyl, the deadliest drug in America, happen fast and they are growing more powerful, so Narcan needs to be available where the opioid users are. If the university decides to provide Narcan, it is vital that the supply be readily available to the general population. It could be lifesaving. Statistics indicate that laypersons using Narcan have saved nearly 26,000 lives in the past 20 years. There are no known side-effects or risks to Narcan; you cannot harm someone by giving it to them by mistake. But you can save lives, so make it available!

## **EMT/First Responder**

I have been on calls to overdose victims. Trying to revive someone is intense, and it is something that requires professional training and careful monitoring. If Narcan is available to students – say at a party – people might hesitate to call 911 because they think they can handle things themselves and they don’t want to get in trouble. They might not know that Narcan is metabolized faster than opioids, so there is a real danger of rebound overdose after being revived. And, if the brain goes without oxygen, even for just a short time, the damage can be permanent. Reviving overdose victims should be left to trained professionals. We should be called whenever a student faces a medical emergency and an overdose is an emergency! Waiting to call can be fatal.

## **Parent of College Student**

I certainly didn’t send my son off to college with the idea that the university would have policies that “encourage” opioid use. I think making Narcan available is just that kind of encouragement. I worry about him living and working in a residence hall where he might be put in danger because of someone else’s addiction, or, that he might be put in the awful position of having to revive one of his friends or residents. That’s unfair. He chose this college for a good education, but bringing Narcan to campus sends a totally different message about college life. Does the university really want to be known for this?

### College Student

I run into misconceptions about opioid addiction all the time. I had a sports injury and I had an opioid prescribed by a medical doctor. I know what it is like to be addicted to pain medication. I'm in recovery now but unless you have been in that situation, I'm not sure you can understand. It may be that some students experiment – and I don't think they have any idea how dangerous that is – but we live in a free country and people can do what they want, right? It shouldn't stop us from offering help to those who really need it. Make the Narcan available to students—I know many of us will feel a lot safer with it around — and let us choose when and where to use it.

### College Professor

Our university recently experienced an opioid overdose death. I had her in class and she was a good student. You would never know it, but she was addicted to medically-prescribed oxycodone following an accident. She tried but couldn't kick the addiction. My fear is that if the university accepts Narcan it will unintentionally send the wrong message. Narcan could give false hope to those struggling with addiction. That is where all the resources and the support should go: to help those struggling. I know some medical professionals are in favor of Narcan because it saves lives, but my economist colleagues told me about research suggesting that Narcan availability might perversely increase the number of people who try opioids! I really care for these students so I say No Narcan. As harsh as it sounds, No Tolerance has the best chance of saving lives.

### Substance Abuse Coalition Representative

My office looks at the opioid addiction crisis in the region. In terms of fairly distributing resources, there are areas in which people really need Narcan. Honestly, college campuses are already well served. If the foundation wanted to effectively save lives, and respond to the rights of those who may not be able to afford the quality of health care available to university students, then I would be happy to let them know where the Narcan kits would do the most good: the inner city and in rural areas. I guess I question the motives of the foundation and the university. Are they trying to do good or look good?

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With your Student Government group, use the Eight Key Questions to discuss, generate more ethical questions, and then decide if the university should accept the Narcan donation.

<b>Fairness</b>	
<b>Outcomes</b>	
<b>Responsibilities</b>	
<b>Character</b>	
<b>Liberty</b>	
<b>Empathy</b>	
<b>Authority</b>	
<b>Rights</b>	

*This is a fictional thought experiment written by James Madison University faculty and staff for Ethical Reasoning in Action.*