

ALCOHOLISM & DRUG ABUSE WEEKLY

News for policy and program decision-makers

Volume 33 Number 45

November 22, 2021

Print ISSN 1042-1394

Online ISSN 1556-7591

IN THIS ISSUE...

Our page 1 stories this week look at the federal role on reducing overdose drug deaths, and problems with that role, and on the possibility that psilocybin could help treat nicotine addiction.

... See stories, this page

Telehealth faulted for missing signs of drug misuse/SUDs

... See page 5

Prenatal cannabis use increased during the pandemic

... See page 7

There will be no November 29 issue of ADAAW published. Your next issue will be December 6.



2019 recipient of Henrick J. Harwood and Robert E. Anderson Award in Recognition of an Individual's Distinguished Service in the Field of Addiction Research, Training, and Evaluation.



Honorable Mention
Spot News 2016

FIND US ON

facebook

adawnewsletter



2016 Michael Q. Ford
Journalism Award

FOLLOW US ON

twitter

ADAWnews

Feds focus on naloxone and fentanyl test strips, blame COVID-19 for OD increases

Last week, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that the predicted overdose death count for the 12-month period ending April 2021 is more than 100,000. That's one death every five minutes, said Rahul Gupta, M.D., director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), at a Nov. 17 press briefing with the heads of the CDC, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Bottom Line...

The 100,000 overdose deaths in the year ending in April, announced last week by the CDC, call for more naloxone and fentanyl test strips, according to federal officials.

Gupta said people with substance use disorders (SUDs) need access to harm reduction, evidence-based treatment and recovery support services, as well as primary prevention and supply reduction. He stressed that none of this could be done without the support of Congress, which is

See **OVERDOSES** page 2

Researchers hope psilocybin could improve quit rates for smokers

With nicotine being one of the most addictive substances and the available treatments for nicotine addiction leading to no better than a 30% success rate, it's no wonder that a newly announced multisite study of the psychedelic psilocybin for smoking cessation is generating excitement. While taking care not to oversell the potential of this strategy, those involved with the research hope at least that a large study with a diverse population will help identify who might eventually benefit most from the alternative approach.

"If we could double abstinence rates, it would ultimately translate to millions of lives saved and substantial cost savings," Peter Hendricks, Ph.D., one of the study's principal investigators based at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Public Health, told *ADAAW*.

Taking that kind of long-term view of the cost-benefit equation will be important if psilocybin ever receives federal approval as a treatment for smoking cessation, as the upfront costs associated with administering psychedelics in controlled settings supervised by health professionals have already raised concerns about who would agree to pay for these treatments (See "Psilocybin: Next to treat depression, OCD and nicotine addiction," *ADAAW*, Sept. 27; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/adaw.33204>).

See **NICOTINE** page 7

Bottom Line...

Three sites will recruit a total of 66 smokers to determine whether two sessions administering the psychedelic psilocybin will promote long-term abstinence from nicotine.

Prenatal cannabis use increased during the pandemic

Pregnant women have reported using cannabis to relieve stress and anxiety, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the stress and prenatal cannabis use increased, according to a recent research letter published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Early on in the pandemic, cannabis retailers were considered “essential businesses” in California, and they remained open with record sales in 2020. According to the research letter, “Rates of Prenatal Cannabis Use Among Pregnant Women Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” of 100,005 pregnancies, the rate of prenatal cannabis use was 6.75% before the pandemic. During the pandemic,

this rate increased to 8.14% of pregnancies. There were no significant month-to-month trends.

The researchers used data from Kaiser Permanente Northern California; all women were tested during pregnancy.

In general, cannabis use among pregnant women increased from 3.4% in 2002 to 7.0% in 2017. Specific stressors for pregnant women during the pandemic include:

- social isolation,
- financial distress,
- psychosocial distress,
- increased child care burden,
- changes in prenatal care and
- concern about risks of COVID-19.

The women were tested at around eight weeks’ gestation as part of standard prenatal care, and this does not necessarily reflect whether they continued to use cannabis throughout pregnancy. It’s possible that some of the positive tests for cannabis reflect use prior to pregnancy recognition.

Risks of prenatal cannabis use include low birth weight and potential effects on neurodevelopment of the child. The researchers urge clinicians to “educate pregnant women about the harms of prenatal cannabis use, support women to quit, and provide resources for stress reduction.”

The study was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. •

NICOTINE from page 1

This is not the first time researchers have looked at psilocybin as a treatment for smoking cessation. An open-label pilot study involving 15 participants found that psilocybin in combination with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) led to a biologically verified abstinence rate of 67% at 12 months and 60% at two-and-a-half years. An ongoing open-label study involving 44 patients that is comparing psilocybin and the nicotine patch has shown promising interim results in psilocybin’s favor.

But the newly announced research, being funded at \$4 million by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), will involve a more rigorous double-blind design and a larger and more diverse patient population, Emily Einstein, Ph.D., chief of the Science Policy Branch at NIDA, told *ADAW*.

Three research sites, at UAB, Johns Hopkins University and New York University, will recruit a total of 66 participants for the federally funded study, which Johns Hopkins principal investigator Matt Johnson, Ph.D., calls the first federally supported study of a classic psychedelic as a therapeutic in half a century. All three sites have

Psilocybin could never be conceptualized as a stand-alone treatment that smokers could self-administer in the way they can for the nicotine-replacement therapy (NRT) or smoking-cessation drug they pick up at their local pharmacy.

experience in conducting psilocybin research; Johnson is the Susan Hill Ward Professor of Psychedelics and Consciousness Research at Johns Hopkins, which has conducted psilocybin trials for more than 16 years and according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has set the standard for safe conduct of psychedelic research.

Parameters of study

As described in an NIH abstract, blinded study participants at each of the sites will receive either psilocybin or niacin in two sessions that will be scheduled one week apart. The government has identified niacin as the preferred active placebo for psilocybin because it approximates the altered state experienced under the psychedelic. Doses of psilocybin will be 20 mg/70 kg in

the first session and 30 mg/70 kg in the second session.

UAB’s Hendricks said that although his clinical research site has not yet hired the individuals who in pairs will be assigned to be present with the participants in the psilocybin sessions, they could be social workers, counselors or psychologists who will be supervised by a doctor-level professional. The setting for these sessions must be carefully controlled, because the psychedelic experience can be overwhelming, even panic-inducing for some. Psilocybin could never be conceptualized as a stand-alone treatment that smokers could self-administer in the way they can for the nicotine-replacement therapy (NRT) or smoking-cessation drug they pick up at their local pharmacy.

Continues on page 8

Continued from page 7

But those existing treatments result in abstinence from smoking for too few patients, most experts say. At 12 weeks, biologically verified abstinence from smoking has occurred in around 23% of patients using NRT or bupropion and around 34% of patients using varenicline, Einstein said. Abstinence rates at six months also have not been much better than 30% with existing treatments. Use of CBT in conjunction with an approved treatment does improve outcomes.

Participants in both groups in the newly announced study will receive CBT in conjunction with psilocybin or niacin. The study will measure biochemically confirmed seven-day point-prevalence abstinence at various stages, up to 12 months post-treatment.

The NIH abstract states, “We hypothesize that psilocybin will be associated with improved cognitive control and decreased anticipation of withdrawal relief (from smoking) 1 day after the target quit date, which will be associated with greater 7-day point-prevalence abstinence at 12-month follow-up.”

Cost considerations

If psilocybin continues to demonstrate effectiveness for smoking cessation, it ultimately will be important to determine how many sessions are optimal and who needs to staff them, as cost considerations on the front end could determine how widely used this approach would become if it receives Food and Drug Administration approval.

Einstein said this explains in part why this trial will recruit a more ethnically and economically diverse population than past trials, as it will be important to evaluate whether a treatment that requires multiple visits to a medical clinic will pose a barrier for people with limited transportation options, for example.

Hendricks added that programs

Coming up...

The annual meeting of the **American College of Neuropsychopharmacology** will be held **Dec. 5-8** in San Juan, Puerto Rico. For more information, go to <https://acnp.org/annual-meeting/dates-locations/>

The annual meeting of the **American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry** will be held **Dec. 9-12**. Virtual. For more information, go to <https://www.aap.org/training-events/>

also would have to account for the cost of a preparation session designed to inform patients of the treatment and to build a therapeutic alliance before the first administration.

He said the inclusion of a diverse population will help in the identification of potential moderators of response. “Any given treatment is not going to work for everyone,” he said. “If we assume some may not respond, it helps to have diversity.”

While there is great enthusiasm over this trial and the federal government’s financial support of it, Einstein did try to downplay any possibly larger implications of NIDA’s role. “This doesn’t reflect a codified policy” regarding psychedelics specifically at the NIH, she said. “We respond to investigator-initiated research.” •

BRIEFLY NOTED

Funding from Pennsylvania for drop-in centers

Funding for substance use disorder (SUD) drop-in centers is open to existing drop-in centers in Allegheny, Philadelphia, Bucks, Delaware and Montgomery counties in Pennsylvania. Single county authorities (SCAs) are not eligible to apply, nor are Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs–licensed treatment providers. The purpose is to expand drop-in center services for individuals with SUD in areas of the commonwealth experiencing high overdose deaths. About two to three grants of up to \$650,000 each will be awarded. The application deadline is Dec. 13. For more information, go to <https://www.ddap.pa.gov/DDAPFunding/Pages/Funding-Opportunities.aspx>. The source of the funding is federal. •

In case you haven’t heard...

Leaving a dog locked in her car led to a woman’s arrest for drug possession — although the woman was in the car too, and the dog was fine. Police checked the vehicle of the Wisconsin woman after seeing her dog. She is charged with felony possession of narcotic drugs, felony possession of methamphetamine, misdemeanor possession of an illegally obtained prescription drug and misdemeanor possession of drug paraphernalia, according to the *Juneau County Star-Times*. If convicted, she faces up to three years and six months in prison or a fine of up to \$10,000, or both, for each of the felony charges. The police officer saw the windows fogged up but didn’t see anyone in the car at first, just the dog. When he walked to the window, the dog seemed fine, but there was a woman curled up on the front seat. The officer, after knocking on the window and receiving no response, saw track marks on the woman’s arms, and there was an orange hypodermic needle cap next to the shifter. He believed she was overdosing, and another officer arrived on the scene and recognized the woman as a drug user who had a drug warrant and a failure to pay child services warrant. She was placed under arrest. A search of the vehicle found Narcan, pills and other substances. She is scheduled to be arraigned in March. There was no other indication of what happened to the dog, but apparently both were released.