



AHA TRANSFORMATION TALKS

STRATEGIES FOR REIMAGINING HEALTH CARE

Advancing opioid stewardship strategies to save lives

America's opioid epidemic continues to escalate. Preliminary federal data released in April 2021 showed that 87,000 Americans died of drug overdoses in the 12 months through August 2020, with opioid-related fatalities being a primary driver in those numbers.

That's more than any 12-month period since the opioid epidemic began, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Other CDC data show that:

- **Opioids accounted for around 75% of all overdose deaths** during the early months of the pandemic; about 80% of those included synthetic opioids like fentanyl.
- The final 2020 overdose death total in the U.S. could exceed 90,000, compared with 70,630 in 2019. That would be not only the highest annual number on record, but the **largest single-year percentage increase in the last 20 years.**

The reasons for this surge are many, including **increased social isolation during the pandemic, limited access to treatment services** and **disruption to drug supply chains** that are impacting access to traditional illicit opioids which has led to a rise in more potent deadlier synthetic opioids.

While hospitals and health systems have dedicated tremendous effort and resources to opioid stewardship, there is still opportunity to do more. Managing this crisis requires a population health approach that should include key stakeholders. Emergency department (ED) leaders and community organization partners will be particularly important to this effort since they are on the front lines of working with opioid use disorder (OUD) patients in crisis.

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5 critical elements to address in opioid stewardship¹

To respond swiftly to these issues and develop a data-driven approach to their opioid stewardship programs, five critical elements need to be addressed:

- 1. Develop a leadership strategy:** An effective leadership team should elevate awareness, define direction, drive efforts related to pain assessment and management and include multiple service lines and departments to provide a broad line of sight.
- 2. Conduct an environmental scan of available resources, existing efforts and available data.**
- 3. Select measures, set goals and develop an improvement plan to drive progress:** As you begin to review the baseline data displayed by your organization's selected measures, you may see differences across departments and prescribers, which may be driven by inconsistent practices. It may be appropriate to establish various incremental goals to encourage improvement while averting unintended consequences of aggressive improvement goals. Areas to measure include drug screening for OUD/substance use disorder, the number of referred patients still in treatment 30 days later and long-term recovery/abstinence 12 months out or longer.
- 4. Create policies and education for care teams:** Policies and procedures should be evidence based, comprehensive, cohesive and compassionate across all facets of opioid stewardship, and should adhere to state and federal regulations. As you review policies, ensure that they do not perpetuate stigma and that they offer guidance to adequately attend to the individualized nature of pain management.
- 5. Provide education and engage patients:** It is critical to continuously revise and improve patient education materials and strategies to engage them in shared decision-making about their pain management and treatment options.

To learn more about how leaders are reimagining health care, visit the AHA Transformation Talks [resources page](#).

Discussion Questions:

- 1. Where are we in the opioid epidemic fight? What's working? What's not working? What have we learned?**
- 2. What impact has the pandemic had on the current situation?**
- 3. What are the keys to rapid, accurate assessment and treatment of opioid-use disorder patients? What lab tests are critical to this effort?**
- 4. How have changes in the illicit drug supply chain exacerbated the current situation, particularly with regard to synthetic opioids?**
- 5. How can clinical, laboratory and hospital leaders work together to optimize opioid stewardship management?**
- 6. How can providers increase access to care for OUD patients and strengthen ties with other health organizations to fill gaps in community needs?**

¹ "[Stem the Tide: Opioid Stewardship Measurement Implementation Guide](#)," American Hospital Association, 2020.