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## INFORMATION BULLETIN

May 30, 2013

Office of the Provincial Health Officer

### **Health workers urged to watch for suspicious overdoses**

VICTORIA – The Provincial Health Officer has advised emergency physicians, first responders, and other health-care workers to be watchful for potential overdoses associated with the drug fentanyl.

The BC Coroners Service's preliminary numbers suggest that there have been 23 deaths related to fentanyl in the first four months of 2013, as compared to 20 related deaths in all of 2012. When fentanyl has been sold on the street in other jurisdictions, many people died from unexpected overdoses. During a 2006 fentanyl epidemic in Chicago, 342 people died.

A large supply of the drug was seized by Vancouver Police recently in connection with two overdose events. Fentanyl is very dangerous, and people taking it might be under the impression that they are taking either heroin or oxycodone.

Fentanyl is an opioid. However, it can present a significantly higher risk of overdose. Should regular heroin users inadvertently take it instead of heroin, it could cause overdose and death. Fentanyl produces symptoms and signs that are indistinguishable from overdoses of other opioids and, while the treatment of patients with a fentanyl overdose is essentially the same as for other opioids, it can require significantly higher doses of naloxone.

Fentanyl can look identical to heroin or oxycodone, and can come in similar packaging. While the Provincial Health Officer always advises against the use of illicit drugs, people who do take illicit drugs should not use alone, should inject slowly and use Insite in Vancouver when possible. Call 9-1-1 at the first sign of distress, such as trouble breathing or loss of consciousness. People handling illicit drugs should use extreme caution, as fentanyl can be absorbed through mucous membranes and can cause severe adverse reactions and even death.

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