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DEADLY MIX

Tainted heroin's costs far-reaching

Friday, June 16, 2006

The following editorial is reprinted from the Chicago Tribune. Staff-written Sun editorials will return soon.

Some are dull, wizened junkies. Others are fresh-faced young customers, flitting like moths to a flame. Still others are shrewd and seasoned explorers, drawn to the remarkable high from a painkiller 80 times as potent as morphine. But no matter what brings them, the unluckiest pay a few bucks for a rapid rush they don't live long enough to enjoy.

Should the rest of us care that bad choices are leading to dead ends?

Week after week this spring, drug users have been dying by the dozens in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and more locales after injecting or snorting heroin laced with the otherwise useful drug fentanyl. Not that those who shun illicit drugs have paid more than fleeting attention. Hey, this isn't happening on our blocks.

We should care, though. And not only because even the most broken spirits, those who live dose to dose, are somebody's children. Consider:

The deadly heroin mix confronts each of us with what happens every day in too many neighborhoods: Eager drug buyers shower revenue on violent drug gangs that — to protect their turf and to settle their differences — turn city streets into sluices of blood. Now more of those buyers, Chicagoans and suburbanites alike, are dying. A drug that oncologists use to pre-empt cancer patients' pain during difficult procedures instead is shutting down respiratory systems — literally snuffing out lives.

Federal authorities think they have traced the illicit fentanyl to labs in Mexico. That's a separate reason for concern: Say what you will of U.S. drug laws, which some Americans think encourage distribution of unregulated — and sometimes contaminated — narcotics. But foreign drug lords shouldn't get away with exporting inordinately lethal substances into U.S. cities.

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Heartless as it sounds, drug deaths on this scale have costs that go beyond loss of life. No one is toting up the huge burdens that these fentanyl deaths have created for police patrol officers and investigators, for paramedics, for emergency room staffs, for toxicologists and pathologists, for public and private programs that educate and treat addicts. Like deaths from a heat wave or a homicide spree, these costs get absorbed in municipal and hospital budgets.

Drug use that moves from reckless to deadly rips at society's already thin fabric. The danger isn't as clear-cut as it is with the drunk driver who speeds past schools. But selfish behavior by people who've chosen to ignore the risks arguably makes cities less safe. Like vandals who break windows or squeegee men who hassle drivers, peddlers and users of deadly heroin stoke fears and menace the peace.

Then there's the intangible reason to care about these deaths: Most of us are the people whom our parents, our teachers and our trustworthy friends have raised us to be. Maybe we can't stop the sale of fentanyl-laced heroin. We can, though, applaud the work of law enforcement and health officials who are laboring frantically to save lives less fortunate than our own.

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