

Chris Gray: Hi, I'm Chris Gray.

Scotty Sandow: And I'm Scotty Sandow. And welcome back to the One Pill Can Kill podcast.

In our first episode, we introduced you to Chris and Laura Didier, who lost their extraordinary son Zach to fentanyl poisoning in 2020. It's a heartbreaking story, but so important to hear. If you didn't catch it, it's well worth your time to go back and give it a listen.

Chris Gray: Fentanyl has taken the lives of dozens of Placer residents like Zach in just the past few years, many of whom didn't intend to or even know they were taking it. So what is fentanyl exactly? What makes it so dangerous? And how is it that it's become so easily accessible in our community?

Scotty Sandow: For those answers we're turning today to Dr. Rob Oldham, a medical doctor and psychiatrist and director of Placer County's Health and Human Services Department.

Chris Gray: Can you start by telling us what exactly is fentanyl?

Dr. Rob Oldham: Fentanyl is a drug. It's an opioid medication, has been used for decades now as an analgesic, so a pain medication. Fentanyl you can make synthetically, and it's much more powerful than morphine, 50 to 100 times more powerful.

But also can be made synthetically now very, very cheaply.

Scotty Sandow: And those illegal street drugs can be sold for as little as four to \$10 a dose.

Dr. Rob Oldham: Even for cancer patient, who had really serious pain, Fentanyl was sort of the last thing they pull, because it's so strong. And so yes, it is prescribed often for people who have the most severe pain that is not responding to other treatments, including other opioid.

The biggest reason fentanyl is dangerous like other opioids, is it suppresses respiration, so breathing. That's really why the overdose deaths occur for the most part is it suppresses the central nervous system, which basically you stop telling your body to breathe. That's number one. But it can also have impact on other organ systems, acutely, shut things down. A very minuscule amount of fentanyl that could be adulterating either a street drug or a pill, that could be lethal.

Chris Gray: How small an amount are we talking about?

Dr. Rob Oldham: Can be less than two milligrams, so the size of maybe just a few grains of sand.

Scotty Sandow: We'll learn how fake pills or Fentapills are manufactured in a future episode with a narcotic detective from the Placer County Sheriff's Office. But for now,

suffice to say that it's far from the tightly controlled and regulated settings where legitimate prescription medications are made.

Dr. Rob Oldham: It's a thin margin of error. And I think what we're seeing is that the profit margins, because it's so inexpensive, there's just a push for the dealers to add more and more of it. And so it's a really scary situation.

Scotty Sandow: And according to the CDC, Fentanyl poisonings are the leading cause of death among Americans age 18 to 45.

Chris Gray: If it seems like we've only just recently started to hear about the dangers of Fentanyl, it's because we have. A lot about the illegal drug market has changed very quickly, but the Fentanyl crisis is an evolution of an older epidemic you've already heard a lot about, the abuse of prescription pain killers.

Dr. Rob Oldham: I trained in Alabama and Virginia, so Appalachia, saw the beginning of the opioid epidemic really, about 20 years ago was when it really started taking off.

And we saw it in Placer County a little bit later. And so when I came here in 2014, we actually pulled together an opioid coalition, I believe in 2015, in response to that. And still at that time, it was largely, we did have some problems with people using heroin. At that time Fentanyl wasn't really a big problem. But it was primarily people who were using pain medications they actually got prescribed by their doctor, or sometimes by someone else's doctor, but it was coming from our physicians. And what's happened over time is the physicians actually had a great effort to curb overprescribing.

Scotty Sandow: Placer, like so many other communities, was hard hit by the opioid epidemic. We took it seriously, joining with agencies throughout the region to form the Nevada Placer County Drug Safety Coalition mentioned just a moment ago. And we joined a major class action lawsuit against opioid manufacturers.

Dr. Rob Oldham: The supply of opioids coming from physicians has gone down dramatically. The other thing that we did actually is encouraging more treatment options and educating physicians and other providers about those treatment options. And delivering, one thing that really helps is medication assisted treatment, particularly for opioid use disorders. And so the number of providers who prescribe things like buprenorphine, Suboxone, for these opioid use disorders has gone up in Placer County dramatically over the last seven or eight years.

Chris Gray: As a country, as a community, we succeeded in drastically reducing the amount of prescription opioids that had so freely been available on the street just years before. But as you'll hear from other experts later in this series, the stage for the Fentanyl crisis had already been set.

Scotty Sandow: Prescription drugs had been so easy to get for so long. And after all, weren't they medicine? Popping a pill had come to seem acceptable, normal even. And

not just for fun, but for people looking for help dealing with the things most of us do at some point in our lives, anxiety, depression, chronic pain. Pills seemed safe, until they weren't.

Chris Gray: With the supply of legitimate prescription pills drying up, the drug trade turned to an emerging alternative. Fentanyl produced similar effects to the opioids so many people were already addicted to, but was cheaper and easier to produce. And it was even more addictive and profitable.

Scotty Sandow: With less prescription drugs being diverted away from their intended patients for sale on the street, a much greater percentage of the pills sold on the street are not coming from doctors and pharmacies, but instead are illegally manufactured. And those pills that are illegally manufactured, almost all of them contain Fentanyl. But there's really no sure and safe way to know.

Dr. Rob Oldham: You can buy Fentanyl test strips to test a drug, but even that's not 100%, because it's like a chocolate chip cookie, you could pick out a piece of the pill that didn't have as much Fentanyl and get a false sense of security. So it's a really dangerous thing,

Scotty Sandow: Dr. Rob, what should parents know when it comes to Fentanyl?

Dr. Rob Oldham: There's not a specific what do you look for for fentanyl poisoning, but just in general for an opioid overdose, the telltale signs, having the pupils get smaller is one of the earliest things that you see. That's why sometimes in the doctor's office, you see them checking the pupil size, especially if they don't react to light. Just someone who's having a hard time staying awake, nodding off. But then later in the overdose, literally, as I mentioned, kind of the last thing is the having difficulty breathing. And along with that, you'll see the extremities start to get blue. So when you get difficulty breathing, not being able to get enough oxygen to your tissues, which causes kind of the fingers and that sort of thing, extremities, to start to change color and turn blue, and just having the cold clammy skin and not able to maintain posture.

Chris Gray: Death from Fentanyl poisoning can and often does happen quickly. But a poisoning can be reversed if caught early enough by administering a drug called Narcan.

Dr. Rob Oldham: It's available in the pharmacy, but as I mentioned, it's also available through other routes of community distribution now, including through our adult system of care, through Granite Wellness Centers, we have other community based clinics that are besides in pharmacies that are distributing that through the community. There's a brief training video that you can do so you can get educated about how to administer Narcan, but don't even need a prescription anymore.

But now with Fentanyl, those rescues are becoming harder and harder just because, one, it happens so quickly, but also because it's so powerful, sometimes even Narcan can't easily reverse the effects of an overdose from Fentanyl.

We've actually had an amazing community effort and initially with law enforcement, but now community distribution. So we have every law enforcement officer in Placer County who's carrying this overdose reversal drug. We now have other people in the community, especially where people who use drugs might be more likely to overdose.

Chris Gray: But that's maybe the most alarming thing about all of this. Fentanyl poisonings have been killing the kind of kids you'd be the least likely to suspect

Dr. Rob Oldham: Back five years ago, I'd say almost all the overdoses that we were seeing were people who knew that they were using an illicit substance and had that intended effect, probably to get high or someone who had an addiction, who was trying really not to go into withdrawal. And so I think what has shifted now is we're seeing more and more especially young people who are having Fentanyl overdoses, really not with the intent to get high or who don't have a preexisting addiction that they're trying to avoid going into overdose.

Chris Gray: A quick note about the word overdose. In our last episode, we talked about why in the One Pill Can Kill campaign we describe Fentanyl deaths as poisonings. Many people who die after taking Fentanyl had been deceived into thinking they were taking a prescription medication, and the word overdose carries some stigma about drug use that can be a barrier to understanding the dangers of Fentanyl. Rob's using overdose in the common medical sense, referring to a lethal dose of any substance, not the circumstances of the exposure.

Dr. Rob Oldham: There's a long history of culture, especially among young people, of taking pills that don't belong to you, either recreationally like as a party, but even their medications, stimulant medications like Adderall for ADHD, to actually help study better or, like I mentioned, to help address sleep or help kind of functional things. And so kids just trying to kind of function in the world who that's their only goal.

Often there are no warning signs with Fentanyl, which is again, why it can be so frightening. Helping to identify, making it okay to talk about those problems and get help for those problems rather than turning to, getting, taking a pill that doesn't belong to you and hope to get some relief. Unfortunately, what we're seeing now with Fentanyl, as opposed to earlier in the opioid epidemic, is sometimes we're seeing overdoses in adolescence, young people, without a lot of warning signs.

One of the things as we deliver mental health services, but also as we work in the community and talking about mental health issues, that we can also kind of

work this message around Fentanyl in, because I think, again, a lot of people are, again, taking medications to get relief from mental health symptoms. We offer addiction services, and so, again, a lot of the folks we see dying from overdose deaths from Fentanyl are people who have addictions.

In Placer County we offer walk-in services five days a week now for behavioral health services. And you can read about that on our website. But also across the system, I think access has gotten better. Through the pandemic we see more telehealth resources. And so, yeah, hopefully that's getting better. And yeah, some people have tried to access services before and have failed, but the message to them is, I think for everyone is, to not give up, that treatment is out there, is available, it works, and I'm hoping it's becoming more accessible. That's certainly our goal, is to do our part to make it so.

Scotty Sandow: There's a tricky line to walk here. Yes, it's likely that some of the kids turning to pills are doing it to get relief from mental illness like depression or anxiety. But then there are kids like Zach Didier who showed no signs of any struggles or inclination to experimenting with drugs.

Dr. Rob Oldham: The way we talk to our children about it has had to shift away from the conversation about not taking drugs to get high and those dangers, to literally encouraging them to get help, which I think is a different conversation, which we also have and kind of reducing the stigma of getting help for things like mental health problems. But, also, really, I think we have to have the conversations earlier and earlier specifically about not taking a medication that doesn't belong to you for any reason. By the way, it's not just young people. So we had an epidemic a few years back based more out of Sacramento County where it was older adults who were sharing pills. And so I think it's a message really across the board, this idea that you can take a prescription medication that doesn't belong to you, I think we just have to get rid of that idea and that only medications that belong to you. So if there's one thing that shifted, that's it. We really need to focus on that message.

Chris Gray: Dr. Oldham's not speaking here just as a psychiatrist, but as the parent of teenagers himself.

Dr. Rob Oldham: We have four daughters. The oldest is 17. The youngest just turned six. And, yeah, first, being a parent, during a pandemic and we'd had the school shooting in Texas. It's the hardest thing. I mean, people talk about being a health officer during the pandemic and, yeah, that's been hard. But being a parent these days to me is the hardest thing.

Having adolescents, in particular, knowing what to say, knowing how to stay connected, how to know what's going on in their lives, but not be overly involved? It's all really hard, even as someone who's trained in this area as a psychiatrist. And so what do I say? I think we have to start with being real and talking about how hard it is, particularly with social media and just different things that we didn't experience growing up.

What I'm most encouraged by right now is to see how we're really coming together as a community, across different departments, to get the word out. It's the hardest thing to have these conversations and you don't know what to say. Sometimes I know I don't, but just starting to have them. And so, yeah, this can happen really quickly. This is happening in our communities right now. And go and have a conversation tonight with, especially your teens, your adolescents, but other family members too, who haven't heard this message. Help us get this word out.

Scotty Sandow: Getting the word out is indeed crucial. And if you're with us this far, we hope we can count on you to help us with that.

Chris Gray: But as we continue that conversation, know too that Placer's law enforcement agencies are out there right now, and every day, working to interrupt the supply of Fentanyl and arrest and prosecute the people who are selling it.

Scotty Sandow: In our next episode, we'll talk to the Placer County Sheriff's Office to learn more about the market for Fentanyl in Placer County and how it's reaching our kids and how they're working to stop it. Stay tuned.