

February 05, 2024

## **Belleville Ontario police claim, and media reporting of, “opioids contaminated with GHB”, from November 07, 2023.**

**FALSE:** GHB was not found in any samples submitted by the Belleville police to Health Canada’s Drug Analysis Service.

### **BACKGROUND**

On November 07, 2023, a media event with Belleville Police Service, Hastings Prince Edward Public Health, and other community partners was held to “reinforce the severity of the drug poisoning situation at the time, given a notably higher rate of calls and reported drug poisoning events than usual”.

**CBC News** reported on the press conference: [“Belleville, Ont., sees 'astronomical' spike in overdose calls”](#), in which they reported that the Belleville chief of police said the city typically sees six or seven reports of overdoses a week, but paramedics had been called to 90 since November 1st.

CBC wrote, “The chief said police know there's heroin and fentanyl in the city that's been "laced with GHB and something else." The service has sent samples off to Health Canada for testing.”

In a [video](#) posted with the CBC article, the Belleville chief of police states: “We also know that there is some heroin out there and some fentanyl that has been laced with GHB and something else, we don’t know exactly, we are still waiting to get the results back from Health Canada”.

CBC reported that at the press conference the health unit said it, “was continuing to investigate, but pointed to "early anecdotal data" indicating the jump could be related to brown fentanyl.”

**The Belleville Intelligencer** also published an article, [“Overdose spike fuelled by GHB-laced opioids: Chief Callaghan”](#) which said, “Callaghan attributed the drug crisis to hard drugs such as heroin and fentanyl being cut with a drug identified as GHB, or more commonly known as the “date rape” drug. The lacing with GHB is believed to have contributed to 90 opioid drug calls for assistance responded to by Hastings Quinte Paramedics in the last week while 42 users were treated for overdoses at BGH [Belleville General Hospital].”

Following the press conference Hastings Prince Edward Public Health issued a [statement](#) that advised, “Police partners have advised that the suspected contaminant in local drugs is GHB.”

## CONCERNS ELICITED

As a result of the media coverage and health unit statement, and number of harm reduction and drug checking service providers were concerned:

1. Heroin or fentanyl laced with GHB would be a highly unusual and unexpected combination.
2. What were the lab results going to show about other potential contaminants?
3. What messaging should be developed and who would need to be targeted?

To better understand what was happening, the following were contacted:

- Both media outlets to confirm attributable quotes in their reporting - they confirmed so.
- The Health Unit to ask if their statement was based on police information - they confirmed it was.
- The Belleville Police – their response is discussed below.
- The [Drug Analysis Service \(DAS\)](#) at Health Canada, the laboratory that analysis suspected drug samples seized by law enforcement
  - Initially DAS did not have results available (these typically take 30-45 days to process) but confirmed they had never seen GHB as contaminate in opioids.
  - Results of all samples submitted by Belleville police from November and December (related to this and other incidents) were later released and are discussed below.

## BELLEVILLE POLICE COMMUNICATION

The Belleville police were asked questions about the samples they submitted. They responded: “5 samples contained MDMA, Fentanyl and Crystal Meth. That being said, a patrol officer did seize some drugs at an overdose that were not tested, I will be directing that officer to have the drugs seized sent for testing.”

From their responses, it seems the samples did not test positive for GHB, but it is unclear exactly which samples tested positive for what, and which samples were related to the spike in overdoses. As of February 05, 2024, Belleville police have not responded to further questions for clarification.

The Belleville police also did not actively share results with anyone, including the health unit.

## DAS RESULTS

### November

SAMPLE # / # ÉCHANTILLON	Public Health Sample / Échantillon santé publique	Contains NPS (highlighted) / Contient une NSP (surligné)	Returned to client DATE (YYYY-MM-DD) / DATE de retour au client (AAAA-MM-JJ)	Received DATE (YYYY-MM-DD) / DATE reçue (AAAA-MM-JJ)	Customer City / Ville du client	Prow/Terr	Description	Drug ID 1 / ID 1 de la drogue	Drug ID 2 / ID 2 de la drogue
3,466,059	N	N	2023-11-07	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	WWW	COCBAS	PACETI
3,466,060	N	N	2023-11-07	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	WWW	COCBAS	PACETI
3,466,061	N	N	2023-11-07	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	B	COC	
3,466,064	N	N	2023-11-07	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	B	COC	PACETI
3,466,065	N	N	2023-11-07	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	B	COC	PACETI
3,466,062	N	N	2023-11-14	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	F	OXYCOD	ACETAM
3,466,063	N	N	2023-11-14	2023-10-11	Belleville	ON	F	HYMOR	
3,464,537	N	N	2023-11-21	2023-10-05	Belleville	ON	B	COC	
3,469,685	N	N	2023-11-27	2023-10-25	Belleville	ON	B	COC	
3,469,686	N	N	2023-11-27	2023-10-25	Belleville	ON	B	COC	PACETI

### December

SAMPLE # / # ÉCHANTILLON	Public Health Sample / Échantillon santé publique	Contains NPS (highlighted) / Contient une NSP (surligné)	Returned to client DATE (YYYY-MM-DD) / DATE de retour au client (AAAA-MM-JJ)	Received DATE (YYYY-MM-DD) / DATE reçue (AAAA-MM-JJ)	Customer City / Ville du client	Prow/Terr	Description	Drug ID 1 / ID 1 de la drogue	Drug ID 2 / ID 2 de la drogue	Drug ID 3 / ID 3 de la drogue	Drug ID 4 / ID 4 de la drogue
3,469,687	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-10-25	Belleville	ON	B	PFLFENT	BRMZLAM	COC	CAF
3,471,229	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-10-31	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,471,231	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-10-31	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,471,232	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-10-31	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,473,445	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	WWW	COCBAS			
3,473,446	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,473,447	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,473,448	N	N	2023-12-04	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,473,449	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	WWW	COCBAS			
3,473,450	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,476,089	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,476,096	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,476,099	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,476,101	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,476,105	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	Q	MDMA			
3,476,111	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	Q	METH			
3,476,131	N	N	2023-12-11	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	K	NALOX			
3,473,452	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	FENT	MEDTM	CAF	
3,473,454	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,473,456	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	Q	MDMA			
3,473,457	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	FENT	MEFENT	CAF	DMSP
3,473,458	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	FENT	MEFENT	CAF	
3,473,459	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-07	Belleville	ON	B	FENT	MEFENT	COC	CAF
3,476,135	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-16	Belleville	ON	K	NALOX			
3,478,828	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-28	Belleville	ON	B	COC			
3,478,829	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-28	Belleville	ON	Q	METH			
3,478,830	N	N	2023-12-18	2023-11-28	Belleville	ON	Q	METH			

#### Description

B: Powder and/or grainy substance

F: Tablet(s)

Q = Crystalline substance

WWW: Rock-like solid (crack)

#### Drug ID

CAF: Caffeine

COC: Cocaine

COCBAS Cocaine

DMSP: Dimethylsulphone

FENT: Fentanyl

GHB: 4-hydroxybutanoic acid

MDMA: N-methyl-3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine

MEDTM: Medetomidine

MEFENT: Methylfentanyl

METH: Methamphetamine

NALOX: Naloxone or its salts

PFLFENT: p-Fluorofentanyl

### OF NOTE:

On November 07, 2023, DAS received a “Powder and/or grainy substance” sample from Belleville police that contained **fentanyl**; **medetomidine**; **caffeine**. Caffeine is a common bulking agent in fentanyl. Medetomidine is a tranquilizer approved only for use on animals and can put either animals, or people, into deep states of sedation.

On January 29, 2024, Toronto’s Drug Checking Service released an [communication](#):

## **Medetomidine/dexmedetomidine: “New” veterinary tranquilizer circulating in Toronto’s unregulated fentanyl supply**

*From the communication: Medetomidine/dexmedetomidine was first identified by Toronto’s Drug Checking Service on December 29, 2023, by our analysis site member at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (Clinical Laboratory and Diagnostic Services) using liquid chromatography–Orbitrap high resolution mass spectrometry. Between December 29, 2023, and January 23, 2024, medetomidine/dexmedetomidine was found in 11% of the expected fentanyl samples checked by Toronto’s Drug Checking Service (15 of 140 samples). Medetomidine/dexmedetomidine was found in samples expected to be (i.e., got or bought as) fentanyl, alongside high-potency opioids, like fentanyl, fluorofentanyl, and/or a methylfentanyl-related drug, as well as other central nervous system depressants, like benzodiazepine-related drugs and/or xylazine. The presence of medetomidine/dexmedetomidine was not reported as being expected by those who submitted these samples to be checked. Much like xylazine and benzodiazepine-related drugs, we suspect medetomidine/dexmedetomidine is being added to unregulated fentanyl to mimic or enhance the sedative and euphoric effects of the opioid a person is choosing to use.*

Also, on November 07, DAS received three samples that were a mixture of substances including fentanyl in combination with the analogue, methylfentanyl.

### **WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED**

It is still not clear what exactly was in the drug samples submitted in relation to the spike in overdoses in November 2023, but it is clear GHB was not found in any samples submitted by the Belleville Police to DAS. It is not unreasonable to consider that the spike might have been associated with the presence of medetomidine or fentanyl analogues.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

GHB contamination of, or mixing with, opioids is technically possible but has never been seen before. The initial statements raised a lot of concerns and questions for those working in public health, harm reduction, and directly with people who use drugs; they were trying to understand what happened to help with accurate messaging to keep people safer, and to develop responses and policies rooted in evidence.

There are concerns that information that is speculative can feed narratives that work against public health goals, creates confusion among people who use drugs and service providers, and lends to policies being developed on faulty assumptions.

Confirmation of testing results, proactive sharing of testing results with all stakeholders, and consultation with people who use drugs and those from the harm reduction community, before making public statements, is encouraged.