

31st August 2018



INPUD Statement: Overdose Awareness Day



International Overdose Awareness Day: Remembering Dan Bigg

Today is [International Overdose Awareness Day](#). Today, we strive to raise awareness of drug overdose; we strive to end these tragic deaths. Overdose deaths contribute to between a third and a half of all drug-related deaths and now, due to prohibition and criminalisation of people who use drugs, overdose is the principal cause of death of North Americans younger than fifty years old. **Fentanyl** and **carfentanyl** contaminate heroin and other opiates, with these far stronger drugs increasing in prevalence **due to the unregulated black-market of prohibition**. Fentanyl is now increasing numbers of overdoses and deaths all over the world. Opiate overdose deaths are increasing internationally, with fentanyl now being attributed to these worrying trends throughout Europe, and globally.

Though it is possible to test the content of drugs, **governments have failed to act**: there are no drug testing facilities in the majority of countries, and therefore there is simply no possibility to ensure the content or purity of drugs. Additionally, naloxone – which reverses opiate overdoses, meaning that opiate overdose deaths are entirely avoidable – is easy to administer and cheap, but in the majority of contexts its availability is limited to hospital and medical settings. Crucially, **naloxone is not in the hands of those most likely to need to administer it**, in stark contrast to the World Health Organisation recommendations that emphasise the importance of peer-distribution of naloxone. As a result, thousands of people continue to die. In this context, it is deplorable that **trying to help one's peers can result in police intervention, violence, being charged with a crime, and imprisonment**; it is nothing short of horrifying that [drug-induced homicide laws are used increasingly to target people who use drugs, their friends, and their loved ones](#). These laws do not reduce overdoses or deaths; they are used as a weapon to displace and misdirect blame from **the real culprits: criminalisation, misinformation, and stigma**.

We mourn the tragic and untimely passing of Dan Bigg, the founder and Executive Director of the Chicago Recovery Alliance. [Dan was a pioneering force behind take-home naloxone programmes in the US and beyond](#). He worked hard to ensure that naloxone was in the hands of those who needed it the most, that naloxone was **in the hands of communities of people who use drugs**.

We mourn the passing of a great friend to the drug user rights and harm reduction movements. Dan was a fierce advocate for the recognition of the inherent dignity, agency, and autonomy of people who use drugs, firmly believing that people who use drugs should be leading in the fight for our lives and human rights.

We end this statement with the words of an INPUD member who, like so many of us, owes a huge amount to Dan, and who remembers him here...

"Dan Bigg, the founder of one of the trailblazing harm reduction programs in the United States, the Chicago Recovery Alliance, died 21st August, 2018. Mr. Bigg . . . the Bigg Guy . . . the Narcan Fairy . . . I referred to him by all those names. What an amazing human being he was. I first met him over the phone sometime in the summer of 2011 when I was working with Sue Purchase and the Morpheus Project in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was very, very new to street outreach and had only volunteered with the Minnesota AIDS Project up until then. It was just a quick "Dan Bigg wants to meet you," as she passed her mobile to me. I didn't know who the hell Dan Bigg was, but a voice said something to the effect of "I've heard a lot of good things about you from Sue. You and Sue should come to Chicago sometime this fall, and we'll do some outreach in Blood Alley."

"Blood Alley!?" What the fuck?" I remember almost immediately thinking, "Fuck! I'd be down for that. Hell yeah!" ... "Narcan? What's Narcan, Sue?"

International Network of People who Use Drugs

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I had never heard of naloxone until I met Sue. I began to realize that this was something that was needed more and although Sue and Access Works! and Women With a Point (all her clever double entendres) had been handing naloxone out for at least five years at that point, there was a huge part of the population that was unaware it even existed. I began hearing reports back from participants. An uncle saved his nephew. A younger brother saved his older brother. A man saved his baby's momma. A mother called me and was so nervous to be talking to me but she was so debilitatingly worried that her daughter would overdose because she found a needle in her room when she was picking up her laundry to wash it.

I first met Dan Bigg in Denver Colorado in 2013 at the Drug Policy Alliance conference. Not only did I meet him, I shared a dais with him, Greg Scott and Matt Curtis. I was blown away. I don't remember much except feeling unequal to the legends to my right and left.

After a participant overdosed and was abandoned by her peers to die alone in a motel room, I resolved that if I could help it, I would do all I could to make sure that I would never have to try to hold it together whilst a grieving hysterical mother screamed at me wanting to know why her baby had to die when something so simple and so safe was available. Denver was the first time I set up another community-based organization with underground naloxone provision. And I hooked up the country of Norway when I sent 300ml home with a woman to tide the country over from November to January when their national naloxone distribution program was to begin.

To have Dan's trust and respect meant everything to me. To get a call from him could be a bit anxiety-inducing, like receiving a call from one's father: he had a tendency to talk around the whole issue of naloxone on the phone. That was to maintain his legally grey responsibility for the legally grey area of providing prescription medicine to people to just hand out. So, for the first 20 minutes or so you really weren't certain if you were in trouble for an unintentional slip of the tongue. In the end everything was always cool. "We're solid, Lee. Don't worry. Just keep doing the good work." And he gave everyone such large quantities. With the simplest of ease and the lowest of thresholds. Hell, all it ever took was an email of less than 20 words. And in two days it was at my doorstep. It's always an uncomfortable difficult emotional question when I'm asked if I have any idea how many lives we've saved. I don't know.

How many lives has Dan Bigg saved over more than 15 years of putting naloxone into the hands of the people who needed it the most? More than one million. No, it's not evidence-based. It's just gut feeling.

It hurts to know that I'll never hear his voice again. And that I'll never get a hug from that big bear of a guy ever again."

- Lee Hertel, INPUD member, writing from Wales in August 2018

INPUD stands in solidarity with people who use drugs all over the world, as well as the community at large worldwide, in their observance of International Overdose Awareness Day. For further details, please see the [International Overdose Awareness Day website](#) for detailed information regarding events, tributes, activities, and naloxone trainings. Many of these are provided by, for, and with the drug using community, and it is imperative that our community is at the core of the response to this ongoing crisis. Responses include those from our members, the Asian Network of People who Use Drugs (ANPUD), the European Network of People Who Use Drugs (EuroNPUD) who are providing naloxone trainings and overdose awareness events in Nottingham, as well as Lambeth Service User Council's naloxone and overdose training in Brixton (London), and the Urban Survivor's Union (in the US) who are holding a vigil and memorial alongside their ongoing [#reframetheblame campaign](#) demanding an end to drug-induced homicide laws.

In memory of Dan Bigg, we call for an end to these needless deaths, an end to prohibition, and to criminalisation. We demand an end to the laws and policies that have resulted in this horrific tragedy and this unnecessary loss of life, and demand the decriminalisation of people who use drugs and our communities. We demand for drugs to be legalised so that people do not risk their lives every time they use drugs. Finally, we demand access to comprehensive harm reduction and means with which to test the contents of drugs, as well as widespread access to life-saving overdose-reversing naloxone.

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