Warning: Extreme Danger on Medical Calls involving drugs

Last week an Indiana Police Office almost died an hour after patting down a suspect that had Fentanyl powder on him. It was pointed out later to the police officer he had powder on his shirt and he brushed it off, and the drug was absorbed through his hand. (Article: https://tinyurl.com/msvrhao).

The Indiana State Department of Health in conjunction with their State of Indiana Emergency Medical Services, the State Fire Marshal, and the Indiana State Police put out a warning to all emergency responders that included the following (their full document at http://www.in.gov/activecalendar/mobile/mobiledetail.aspx?iid=266291):

Minimal contact with “Gray Death” (a particularly dangerous mixture of heroin, fentanyl, carfentanil and other synthetic opioids), or other powerful opioids such as Fentanyl can cause an overdose or potentially kill responders with minimal contact and can be absorbed through the skin or accidental inhalation of airborne powder. Carfentanil and other fentanyl-related compounds can come in several forms, including powder, blotter paper, tablets, and spray.

Carfentanil, which is used as a tranquilizing agent for elephants and other large mammals, is 10,000 times more potent than morphine and 100 times more potent than fentanyl. It is often mixed in with other drugs such as cocaine or crystal meth — and often drug users have no idea their drugs have been tainted.

Dr. Michael Olinger, Indian’s State Emergency Medical Services Medical Director recommends when responding to an overdose, response personnel should remember the following best practices:

Exercise extreme caution with any suspected opioid delivery method. Wear gloves and masks when responding to any situation where carfentanil or fentanyl is
suspected. If possible, cover as much of the skin as possible when responding to a potential overdose situation.

**Be aware of any sign of exposure.** Symptoms include: respiratory depression or arrest, drowsiness or profound exhaustion, disorientation, sedation, pinpoint pupils and clammy skin. The onset of these symptoms may occur within minutes of exposure.

**Seek immediate medical attention.** Carfentanil and other fentanyl-related substances can work very quickly, so in cases of suspected exposure, it is important to seek medical attention immediately. Any needle stick should be medically evaluated as soon as possible.

**Do not touch any potential drug materials or paraphernalia.** Carfentanil can be absorbed through the skin or accidental inhalation of airborne powder. Avoid coming into contact with needles, bags or other paraphernalia. Do not come into contact or disturb any powder that may be in the area.

**Be ready to manage the victim’s airway in the event of exposure.** Opioids are especially dangerous because they override the body’s breathing reflex, causing victims to suffocate. While naloxone (Narcan) is an antidote for opioid overdose, it might not be available. Providing breathing assistance could help prolong the victim’s life while waiting for emergency medical services to arrive. Even if naloxone is available, always send an overdose victim to the hospital for monitoring. Naloxone may wear off before the effects of the opioid, making it possible for the victim to stop breathing again.