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Dear Ms. Froke:

The Partnership for Safe Medicines has appreciated the AP Stylebook’s guidance toward more precise and compassionate language about the impact of the opioid crisis. In that spirit, we are writing to ask that the Stylebook adopt changes to speak more precisely about deaths from the counterfeit prescription pills that have been flooding the country since 2015.

Currently, journalists use the same language for both overdoses and counterfeit pill poisonings, which obscures the danger counterfeit medicines pose. Each year, federal, state and local law enforcement have been seizing millions of fake pills made of synthetic opioids like fentanyl, methamphetamine and high doses of benzodiazepines. These pills have killed people in 45 states, and prosecutors across the country are bringing homicide charges against people who make or deal such pills. Readers who reflexively dismiss counterfeit pill poisonings as “completely avoidable if you don’t do drugs” fail to understand that counterfeit pill traffickers are selling fake medicine that harms people—and that they should be protecting themselves.

PSM believes that we need to reframe language around the counterfeit pill trade to more accurately capture what is happening. We suggest that journalists adopt language that makes it clear that counterfeit pill deaths are poisonings, and that people who sell them are committing fraud, and sometimes murder. Furthermore, readers must understand that these pills have nothing in common with their legitimate versions except how they look.

Victims of counterfeit pills do not overdose. They were poisoned.

When journalists write about counterfeit pill deaths, they often write that a victim “overdosed” or “accidentally overdosed,” as if they took too much of a drug that they were seeking.

But pill buyers often have no idea that they are purchasing fentanyl or other dangerous ingredients. Drug traffickers have flooded the black market with products that are identical to legitimate medicines. As a result, people unknowingly take dangerous substances thinking that they are taking legal pills. Thus, a counterfeit pill victim does not “overdose” on a drug. They are poisoned when the pill they take is not what it seems to be.

Counterfeit prescription pills rarely contain the active ingredients of the pills they mimic.

Reporters typically refer to prescription pills being “laced” with fentanyl. The predominant practice is for criminals, both domestic and foreign, to manufacture pills that contain fentanyl or other illicit drugs *instead of* the active ingredient. Reporters should refrain from referring to a pill as being “laced” unless official sources state that both ingredients are present.



Examples based on Associated Press articles:

Original:

County deputies issue public warning for fentanyl overdoses

Officials say one man has died and two others are recovering from an overdose of counterfeit oxycodone pills in Mankato.

A Florida doctor has been convicted in a woman's fatal opioid overdose.

A Florida man has been sentenced to 30 years and five months in prison for selling fentanyl to someone who experienced a fatal overdose.

Proposed revision:

County deputies issue public warning about **deaths from fentanyl pills**

Officials say one man has died and two others are recovering from **fentanyl poisoning after taking counterfeit oxycodone pills** in Mankato.

A Florida doctor has been convicted for distributing the **counterfeit oxycodone pills made with furanylfentanyl** that killed a woman.

A Florida man has been sentenced to 30 years and five months in prison for **selling counterfeit pills made with fentanyl** that killed someone.

PSM began using these new guidelines in March 2021. We invite the AP Stylebook to join us, because we believe that changing the way journalists talk about counterfeit pills in the U.S. will save lives.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this issue.

Sincerely,

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