



Heroin-antidote's cost soars, but NKY, Ohio avoid it

Terry DeMio and Shefali Luthra

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(Photo: Provided)

A shocking price tag for an auto-injector of the antidote to heroin and opioid overdoses is causing problem nationally. But Cincinnati area health departments and anti-heroin advocates say it's not a problem here; they don't use Evzio because of its cost.

Now a small Virginia company called Kaleo makes an injector device that is suddenly in demand because of the nation's epidemic use of opioids, a class of drugs that includes heavy painkillers and heroin. It's called Evzio, and it delivers the non-narcotic heroin and opioids antidote naloxone.

Evzio is joining their ranks of other two drugs in the spotlight recently for high prices. First came Martin Shkreli, the brash young pharmaceutical entrepreneur who raised the price for an AIDS treatment by 5,000 percent. Then, Heather Bresch, the CEO of Mylan, who oversaw the price hike for its signature Epi-Pen to more than \$600 for a twin-pack, though its active ingredient costs pennies by comparison.

Kaleo's product has grown in the wake of more than 33,000 people believed to have died from heroin and opioid overdoses in 2015. As the demand for the product has grown, the privately held firm has raised its twin-pack price to \$4,500, from \$690 in 2014.

Kaleo, founded by twin brothers Eric and Evan Edwards, 36, the company first sought to develop an Epi-Pen competitor, thanks to their own food allergies. Now, they've taken that model and marketed it for a major public health crisis. It's another auto-injector that delivers an inexpensive medicine.

People Advocating Recovery Northern Kentucky switched from Evzio in April 2016 to Adapt Pharma's Narcan spray to save money, said Kristie Blanchet, chairwoman of the nonprofit. "It had everything to do with cost," she said.

The Adapt Pharma Narcan spray costs about \$75 each, and that comes with two doses, each with four milligrams of concentrated Narcan. That comes to \$37.50 per dose.

The spray came with an additional benefit, she said. Fentanyl and carfentanil, the opioids slipped into heroin or substituted for it, carry a threat that can require greater dosages to override an overdose. So the Adapt Pharma brand proved more effective. "We get two doses of the four milligrams, so we were doubling the dose," she said.

When the giveaways to residents switched from the advocacy group to the Northern Kentucky Health Department, the department continued using Adapt Pharma's nasal spray, said spokeswoman Emily Gresham Wherle.

Through the end of December, 183 kits had been provided, 100 for community members and 83 to participants in the Grant County syringe access exchange program. "We've had three documented lives saved from kits provided by the Health Department," Wherle said. The department's cost is about \$80 per kit, including about \$75 for the four-milligram, two-dose device. Funding is from the RC Durr Foundation.

Jason Merrick, board chairman for People Advocating Recovery Kentucky and the director of the Kenton County jail's Addiction Services, helped acquire a grant last year to purchase 1,000 kits and distribute them across the state.

The state uses Adapt Pharma. "It's the answer to the increased potency of heroin and heroin mixed with fentanyl and other opioids," said Merrick.

Ohio emergency services, law enforcement and emergency responders are among those who benefit from the Ohio Pharmacy Services center's price. Since October 2014, the price has held stable for the naloxone it provides. The cost is \$72.50 for a Project DAWN kit and \$295 for 10-packs of naloxone syringes. The organization, a community-based overdose education and naloxone distribution program, provides the naloxone at cost, said Eric Wandersleben, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services.

In Cincinnati, Center for Addiction Treatment medical director Dr. Deborah Frankowski said her agency has no problem providing naloxone. "All pharmacies stock Narcan now," said Frankowski, using the brand name. Medicaid covers the nasal form, she said, and most private insurance companies also cover the cost or part of it.

Kaleo, which is trying to blunt the pricing backlash and turn Evzio into the trusted brand, is dispensing its device for free – to cities, first responders and drug treatment programs. Such donations were also essential to the Epi-Pen's business strategy. Northern Kentucky People Advocating Recovery and other groups have gotten donations.

And there's an advantage to Evzio, say some harm reduction advocates. Evzio talks users through the process as they inject naloxone. The company says the talking device is worth the price because it can guide anyone to jab an overdose victim correctly, leave the needle in for the right amount of time and potentially save his or her life.

"It's user-friendly," said Jennifer Stepp of Bullitt County, who teaches children how to turn around an overdose with naloxone. So far, she's been able to get around the price, due to the company's willingness to provide the products at no cost.

Anyone getting naloxone through a pharmacy can face the high prices, however. And even if their insurance covers the medicine, those prices come back on consumers through insurance costs.

"I am absolutely worried about the cost," said Kimberly Wright, who heads a private, parent-support Facebook group called Kentucky Parents Against Heroin. "Families cannot afford \$4,500 for these."

According to Food and Drug Administration estimates, the Kaleo product, which won federal approval in 2014, accounted for nearly 20 percent of the naloxone dispensed through retail outlets between 2015 and 2016, and for nearly half of all naloxone products prescribed to patients between ages 40 and 64 – the group that comprises the bulk of naloxone users.

Even the cost of generic, injectable naloxone – which has been on the market since 1971 – has been climbing. A 10-milliliter vial sold by one of the dominant vendors costs close to \$150, more than double its price from even a few years ago, and far beyond the production costs of the naloxone chemical, researchers say. The other common injectable, which comes in a smaller but more potent dose, costs closer to \$40, still about double its 2009 cost.



CVG airport police get training in nasal naloxone, (Photo: Enquirer file photo)

Still, experts say the device's price surge is way out of step with production costs, and a needless drain on health-care resources.

"There's absolutely nothing that warrants them charging what they're charging," said Leo Beletsky, an associate professor of law and health sciences at Northeastern University in Boston.

Mark Herzog, Kaleo's vice president of corporate affairs, said in an email that most earlier naloxone devices were "developed, designed and intended" for use in medically supervised settings.

Prior kits contained a pre-filled syringe. The Evzio was the first to help laypeople dispense the drug. And competition is limited: One of the few consumer-friendly alternatives to Evzio is a nasal spray device for naloxone.

DeMio is The Enquirer's heroin reporter. Luthra is a Web reporter for Kaiser.