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## Fentanyl-like drug involved in New College overdose deaths

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Published: Friday, November 20, 2015 at 6:09 p.m.

A powerful designer drug that has only recently gained the attention of authorities played a role in the accidental overdose deaths of two young men on New College's campus earlier this year, a medical examiner's autopsy showed.

Over the same weekend in May, authorities responded to first-year student Julian Toomsen-Hall, 18, from Georgia, and campus guest Dylan Besser, 21, both of whom were unresponsive inside campus dorm rooms.

Besser was pronounced dead in a residence hall dorm room after a student called 911 at about 3:30 a.m. on May 8, a Friday. The following Sunday, another student found Toomsen-Hall in a Pei East Residence Hall loft bed at about 3:30 p.m.

Soon after, the area's chief medical examiner said there was a "reasonable likelihood" both men's deaths were caused by an overdose of heroin, fentanyl or a mixture of the two narcotics.

Completed autopsy reports released Friday show that both men had butyryl fentanyl, an analogue of fentanyl, in their blood when they died.

"In the absence of any other good explanation it does seem the drugs caused the death here," Russell Vega, the chief medical examiner for Manatee, Sarasota and DeSoto counties, said.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opiate so powerful that clinically it is administered in micrograms, and even a small amount mixed with other drugs can shut down a user's respiratory system. Local law enforcement agencies have reported fentanyl-laced heroin being sold locally.

The Federal Analogue Act defines an analogue drug as one whose chemical structure is substantially similar to the structure of any listed Schedule I or II drug. Known as designer drugs, the analogue drug can affect the central nervous system in a way substantially similar to or greater than the drug it is imitating.

Butyryl fentanyl represents a new threat; it was just discovered by U.S. medical examiners this summer, Vega said.

"One of the reasons that these cases in particular took so long to complete was the (University of Florida's Forensic Toxicology Laboratory) had to sort of develop and then validate the presence of these chemicals," he said. "Because this is not a drug that has been produced pharmaceutically or clinically tested the only information about the drug would be from the people who are identifying it in laboratories that we deal with: criminal laboratories and medical examiners' laboratories."

Butyryl fentanyl was the only drug a screening found present in Toomsen-Hall's blood. Vega said circumstantial evidence presented to him indicated that the drug was injected into Toomsen-Hall's bloodstream.

"I think we can say with very good certainty that in his case the butyryl fentanyl was

the predominant factor in causing his death,” Vega said.

Besser's case was more complicated, Vega said.

In addition to butyryl fentanyl, a screening also found signs of alcohol, Xanax and MDMA in the University of Central Florida student's blood.

“In terms of is one (drug) predominant over the other, I can't say,” Vega said.

“Maybe someday when we look back on this and we have more experience with butyryl fentanyl we'll be able to tell.”

As of Friday, the Sarasota Police Departments investigation into both men's deaths was still open, agency spokeswoman Genevieve Judge said.

“Detectives do still believe fentanyl-laced heroin is in the area and being sold locally but not to the degree that it was earlier this year,” she added. “Heroin is still a highly abused street drug in the area.”

Vega said there's been a decrease in the rate of suspected opioid-related deaths his office has seen since this summer, but Manatee and Sarasota counties are still seeing higher than baseline levels of those deaths.

“We're still in a midst of that epidemic, but we may be past its peak,” he said. “But these things have peaks and valleys. We had a valley before the summer, then the summer hit really hard.”

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