THE CRITICAL ROLE OF FAMILY CAREGIVERS IN SUPPORTING THE HEALTH OF RURAL PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

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Background:
Over 54,000 Canadians have died from drug poisoning since 2016. Although most responses focus on urban areas, drug deaths are rising in rural settings where little research has examined the experiences of people who use drugs (PWUD) and their families. In rural communities, formal services are often limited and families must provide unpaid care. Therefore, we asked: how do unpaid family caregivers support the health of PWUD in rural settings?

Methods:
This qualitative community-based research is guided by The Care Collective's (2020) theorization of "careless communities" (e.g., care responsibilities that have shifted from the state to families). We conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 unpaid family caregivers of PWUD in rural Western Canada (2024-2025). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to generate key themes.

Results:
Three themes were developed (Filling the Gaps, Caring for the Whole Person, and Caring Across the Lifecourse). Families provide important unpaid care to support the health of PWUD in rural settings, often supplementing or replacing unavailable formal services. For example, some families described supervising drug consumption in the absence of local harm reduction programs. Their care extends beyond supporting physical health to encompass emotional, financial, and social care that supports the "whole person." Care extends across the lifecourse, from supporting young adults initiating substance use to aging parents. In some cases, care is also provided to other family members, such as children of PWUD, to support overall family health.

Conclusions:
Our findings illuminate the critical role of families as key supports for PWUD and provide a call to action. A comprehensive response that prioritizes structural changes (e.g., enhanced public funding for health and social services in rural settings) and reduces a reliance on unpaid family care is needed to support the health of PWUD and their families.

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