



GLOBAL
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Deadly recipe: 'cooking' fentanyl in Culiacán

By Marcela Del Muro
and Marcos Vizcarra

Iván thought he had an advantage. After recovering from COVID-19, he had lost his sense of smell, something he believed protected him from the gunpowder and toxic fumes of his job. At 29, with a basic knowledge of chemistry, he worked as a fentanyl ‘cook’ for a criminal group in Culiacán. ‘He said that as long as he couldn’t smell it, he wouldn’t die,’ recalled a relative.

For Iván, cooking fentanyl was simple: just follow the recipe. He worked off handwritten notes, carefully measuring chemicals, heat and resting times. His ‘lab’ was really just a kitchen – pressure cookers, old latex gloves and occasionally a pair of goggles. He wore no mask and there was no ventilation. His bosses weren’t going to spend money on safety; if he died, they would replace him.

The Mexican government maintains that fentanyl requires sophisticated labs, but researchers such as Victoria Dittmar of InSight Crime disagree. In Sinaloa, she explains, ‘home cooks’ are synthesizing fentanyl using complete processes and legal precursors sourced from the pharmaceutical and chemical industries. A chemist consulted confirmed that with those ingredients, all you need is household equipment: pressure cookers, flasks and condensers, all easy to buy.

The chemicals come from surprising places: medications for HIV, Alzheimer’s, leukaemia and schizophrenia, as well as perfumes and plastics. But the artisanal process makes the drug far more dangerous. Without controls over purity or dosage, overdoses are almost inevitable. ‘What’s happening now is that pre-precursors are being imported to make precursors, and from there to make fentanyl. It’s like going three or four steps back from the final product,’ said Dittmar.

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For two years and with little protection, Iván mixed chemicals that others would later compress into tablets. He developed his own cleaning ritual: stripping off his clothes and sealing them in a plastic bag, then showering in near-boiling water. He would scrub between his fingernails, wash with soap until he felt clean, and collapse into bed. He often slept for one or two days straight, waking only to use the bathroom, while his wife looked after him.

Iván died on 25 April 2023. He had been celebrating his daughter's birthday and went to work without getting any sleep. When he returned home, exhausted, he skipped his ritual. Still wearing the clothes he had cooked in, he simply washed his hands and went to bed, thinking that would be enough. In the early hours, he tried to get up for water, but collapsed in the kitchen.

His wife found him unconscious and called his bosses first. They didn't answer. Then she dialled 911. The wait for the

The wait for the ambulance felt endless. 'He was dead for half an hour,' says a relative.

A paramedic tried to revive him, performing CPR until, 30 minutes later, Iván's pulse returned. He was rushed to the hospital, but his organs were shutting down. Only his heart and liver held on. Doctors put him on dialysis to cleanse his blood, but his body couldn't take it. His liver failed, and he was declared brain dead. Officially, the health ministry recorded his death as multiple organ failure. But his doctors knew the truth: the chemicals had destroyed him.



ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

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