

September 17, 2009

State fights prescription drug abuse

*BY KAUSTUV BASU
FLORIDA TODAY*

At Merritt Island's Hobbs Pharmacy, customers call ahead if they want to fill a prescription for OxyContin.

The powerful painkiller is not stored on site.

Mark Hobbs said this is his way of trying to fight prescription drug abuse.

The family-owned pharmacy on Banana River Drive was robbed twice in 2007. "We have people with a real need for their medications," said Hobbs, whose family has run the pharmacy for more than 40 years. "And then there are people who are addicted to the stuff and desperate for it."

In Brevard, 199 people died from prescription drug abuse in 2007 and 2008. Prescription drug seizures by the Brevard County Sheriff's Office went up by 87 percent in 2008 compared with the year before, from 2,895 doses to 5,406 doses.

Over the past 10 years, the mood-altering effects of OxyContin in particular have led to a significant increase in illicit usage. A single 80-milligram OxyContin pill can be sold on the street for as much as \$50, which is "several, several times the original price," said Agent Doug Caskey of the Brevard County Sheriff's Office.

Meanwhile, the state is stepping up its efforts to fight the menace. In July, Florida became the 39th state to adopt prescription drug-monitoring laws. And next year pharmacists can start using an online system to detect prescription fraud and "doctor shopping."

Statewide, deaths from prescription drug abuse now far surpass illegal drug abuse, officials said.

In 2007, Florida reported 989 deaths from illegal drugs.

Prescription drugs killed 2,328 people in the same time.

Several reasons contributed to Florida becoming a hotbed of pill abuse, said Andrew Benard, chief of staff for the Florida Office of Drug Control in Tallahassee. They include: issues with health care licensure, a transient population, other states implementing prescription drug-monitoring programs, and a late start by Florida in establishing its own monitoring prescription abuse.

"We have been trying to pass this prescription drug-monitoring bill since 2001," Benard said. "I think lawmakers now understand the criticality of it with its role in reducing drug abuse and drug diversion."

He said a database to monitor pill abuse, and increase patient standard of care, will be operational by December, 2010.

"It is a uniform database, which ensures the privacy and confidentiality of its information, that physicians and pharmacists can check," he said, adding that details of the system are still being worked out.

Violent problem

In addition to manifesting itself in rising abuse statistics, the illicit prescription drug trade also can be extremely violent.

In Brevard County, pharmacies have been robbed, homes broken into and people shot -- all in the quest for prescription drugs like OxyContin and other powerful painkillers like Vicodin and Percocet.

In July, two masked men invaded a West Melbourne house and shot and killed one man while critically wounding his brother. The sheriff's office described the incident as a "prescription drug robbery gone wrong."

Sheriff's detectives investigating the incident said some of the participants were involved in an organized ring that would forge prescriptions, buy pills and sell them in places as far away as Kentucky.

Family issue

Cmdr. Doug Waller of the sheriff's office said prescription abuse is a critical issue for everyone -- from families to the medical community as a whole.

"It affects every age group and every ethnicity," he said.

"It starts at home, by preying on the family medicine cabinet," Waller said. "When that runs out, you go looking to friends and neighbors."

That, in turn, can lead to doctor shopping -- going to different doctors and getting them to prescribe you drugs. And that can eventually lead to prescription fraud or buying pills from illicit providers.

Waller said another thing that compounds the abuse problem is the fact that prescription drugs tend to be abused in their purest form -- unlike illegal drugs, which are often diluted. People often snort prescription drugs after grinding them into a powder.

Be aware

Increasing community awareness is an important aspect to fighting the problem -- such as a talk organized earlier this week by Palm Bay police.

On Monday, Karen Perry talked to Palm Bay parents about the dangers of prescription drug abuse. PREVENT of Brevard, a community organization committed to preventing substance abuse, was also represented.

Perry, a south Florida resident, lost her 21-year-old son in 2003 to a drug overdose.

The next year, she started a nonprofit organization called NOPE -- Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education -- to help educate people with prescription drug abuse issues. NOPE now partners with law enforcement agencies across the state. "We try to share personal stories," Perry said. "This can happen to anyone."

Perry believes prescription drugs have become a gateway drug for the young.

"Most parents are worried about their kids drinking or smoking pot," Perry said. "But the bigger danger might be lurking in the medicine cabinet within easy reach."

Contact Basu at 242-3724 or kbasu@floridatoday.com.

Additional Facts

Prescriptions and teenagers

- Each day, 2,500 teens in the U.S. try prescription drugs to get their first high.
- 60 percent of teens who have abused prescription painkillers did so before age 15.
- 12- to 17-year- olds abuse prescription drugs more than Ecstasy, crack and cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine combined.
- There are as many new abusers aged 12 to 17 of prescription drugs as there are of pot.

-- Partnership for aDrug-Free America