

Lax oversight has addicts flocking to Florida for painkillers

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MIAMI -- While more than 30 other states have taken steps to monitor the legal sale of heavy-duty painkillers such as Oxycontin and Vicodin, Florida has stalled - and that has black market dealers and addicts flocking to the state, authorities say.

These prescription monitoring programs, federal authorities say, have reduced drug access in Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Nevada, Utah and other states. They generally require prescription information be submitted to a centralized database; doctors and physicians can then alert authorities to suspicious patient files.

Legislative efforts to establish a similar tracking program in Florida have failed, weighed down by privacy and cost concerns.

Florida needs to come up with a database system that accounts for doctors and independent pharmacies that don't use the same electronic filing system as the national drug store chains, said Bill Janes, director of the state's office of drug control.

"Doctors need to be able to tell for their patients, likewise with the pharmacists, if someone is showing up with stolen or forged prescriptions," Janes said. "We should be able to access that information."

Richard Ward, a Florida Department of Law Enforcement agent who works with the agency's regional drug diversion response teams, said it's only a fraction of the doctors and pharmacists who cause most of the problems.

"What hurts us is, we have good doctors and pharmacists, but then you have a few that are profit makers," he said.

Those "profit makers" nationwide, along with an aging population and more drug marketing campaigns, have helped drive up the number of prescriptions issued for five major painkillers - morphine, codeine, meperidine, oxycodone and hydrocodone. Florida alone reported a 142 percent increase in prescriptions for those drugs between 1997 and 2005, the 10th highest percentage increase in the nation, according to an Associated Press analysis of Drug Enforcement Administration data.

According to FDLE reports, oxycodone - the chemical found in Oxycontin and Percocet - caused an average of 341 deaths a year in Florida from 2000 to 2006. Hydrocodone, commonly sold as Vicodin, was to blame for an average of 196 deaths a year in the same time period.

Though codeine prescriptions have declined nationwide and across Florida, the painkiller frequently prescribed for moderate-to-severe pain has emerged as the most prominent of the "other opioids" that caused an average of 37 deaths a year in Florida since 2004, the FDLE reported.

The state, particularly South Florida, has become a destination for people seeking to buy and get prescriptions for drugs, and then transport them out-of-state for use or resale, according to a national drug threat assessment published in November.

"We can't put a finger on why Florida is being targeted as a place to go to get drugs illegally," said Michael Jackson, executive vice president of the Florida Pharmacy Association. "Perhaps the monitoring system may help to shore that up, but I don't think it's going to do away with attempts by folks to get drugs inappropriately."

Among the "drug tourists" was a Kentucky woman, Jewel Padgett, who organized trips to Florida in 2005 and 2006 to buy oxycodone, hydrocodone and methadone to sell on her return, according to federal prosecutors. Padgett is now in federal prison serving five- and seven-year sentences for drug trafficking.

"She did have several surgeries on her back, she did complain of chronic pain. The doctors in Kentucky wouldn't prescribe the amount of painkillers she felt she needed," said Bart Heffernan, Padgett's Florida attorney.

Pain clinics such as the ones Padgett visited feed the problem, Heffernan said.

"The people who have legitimate need for these pills probably accounts for 1 percent of the people going to these pain clinics. Some are probably addicts already and others go there, referred by friends or whatever, and become addicted because of the pain clinics," he said. "It's usually lower income people going to these clinics to begin with. They eat as many (pills) as they want, then rent comes up and they have to sell the rest of the pills to pay the rent and their bills, and then they become traffickers."

Plenty of Floridians also make work for the FDLE drug diversion teams, in partnership with local and federal law enforcement.

"I've seen pain management clinics where a doctor was seeing 80, 90 patients a day," Ward said. "He was writing prescriptions for every single one."

Internet drug sales and prescription pad thefts also contribute to the problem.

Some of the cases the FDLE teams have investigated in the past year:

- Five Lake City family members arrested for allegedly filling about 570 prescriptions for painkillers, Xanax and Soma in 2004 and 2005. The prescriptions totaled 30,000 pills, state authorities said.

- A north Florida dentist arrested after writing excessive numbers of prescriptions for hydrocodone, Demerol, oxycodone and the anti-anxiety drug Valium for family members.

- Twelve people charged with burglarizing a Jacksonville pain clinic, stealing blank prescription pads and forging prescriptions for hydrocodone.

- A South Florida drug ring that allegedly filled more than \$10 million worth of Internet drug orders, mostly for hydrocodone, since 2003.

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