

Americans hooked on painkillers

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AMERICANS took more than 90,000 kilograms of painkillers in 2005, with sales of five major painkillers almost doubling between 1997 and 2005.

The dramatic increase has been attributed to the ageing population and aggressive marketing by pharmaceutical companies.

According to analysis by the Associated Press of figures from the Drug Enforcement Administration, more than 91,000 kilo-grams of codeine, morphine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and meperidine were purchased in 2005, the most recent year of the data. This equates to 300 milligrams of painkillers for every person in the country.

The main increase was in the sale of oxycodone, the chemical used in OxyContin, which increased sixfold.

The drug is known as "Hillbilly heroin" because of high sales in the Appalachian mountain areas of the US. These areas also recorded the highest sales of hydrocodone, mostly sold as Vicodin.

Nine of the 10 areas with the highest sales were in West Virginia, Kentucky or Tennessee.

AP found that the reason for the increases was that the population of the US was getting older, with the number of Americans aged over 65 expected to reach 65 million by 2020 — almost double the 35 million over-65s in 2000.

But it also said that drug manufacturers had embarked on unprecedented marketing campaigns, with spending on drug marketing almost trebling from \$11 billion in 1997 to nearly \$30 billion in 2005.

Prime-time television in the US is swamped with advertisements for both over-the-counter and prescription drugs — although the impact of the advertisements is somewhat blunted by the requirement to include information in the commercials about the side effects associated with these drugs.

There has also been a change in pain-management philosophy in the US, where it has become more acceptable for people to use painkillers regularly rather than endure chronic pain