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## Prescription drug abuse a growing problem in S. Florida

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The latest report on drug overdose deaths statewide and recent analysis by authorities signal some changes in Florida's drug trade and drug abuse patterns, particularly in South Florida.

Among the growing trends authorities say they have noticed in recent years:

Drug dealers who sell powder cocaine and crack cocaine increasingly also peddle more-profitable prescription pain killers, such as oxycodone.

Groups involved in prescription drug trafficking are growing more organized. All the while, Florida remains one of the few states that does not track prescriptions.

Marijuana grown in suburban homes fitted with hydroponics labs are producing plants that are three to 15 times as potent as the drug was two decades ago. Historically, the majority of these homes uncovered statewide have been in Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

"The information showing the magnitude of today's drug crimes is eye-opening and disturbing," Attorney General Bill McCollum said in a prepared statement.

Authorities mentioned the trends in recent reports and at a Dec. 4 presentation to Gov. Charlie Crist and the Cabinet.

That same day, state medical examiners and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement reported that although cocaine remains the deadliest drug in South Florida and statewide, oxycodone and methadone are growing just as deadly. In the first half of this year, cocaine was involved in 398 fatal overdoses, while oxycodone was linked to 323 and methadone, 392.

The same trend has been seen in Broward and Palm Beach counties, where the number of fatal overdoses linked to oxycodone and methadone has steadily increased in recent years, state reports show.

Officials also report an increase in drug rehabilitation cases.

There were about 80,000 adult rehab cases statewide and 19,000 juvenile ones in the 2006-07 fiscal year, up slightly compared with the previous year, according to the Florida Office of Drug Control. Excluding alcohol, the most-cited drug in adult rehab cases was cocaine, while among juveniles it was marijuana, officials said.

The Office of Drug Control is trying to form anti-drug coalitions in every county to serve as the best observers of the problem on a local level. The coalitions would suggest how to deal with the drug issues. With broad statewide measures failing to make a significant dent, small nonprofit groups, such as the Narcotics Overdose Prevention Education task force, based in West Palm Beach, feel like they are at the forefront of the battle.

They hope emotional, face-to-face discussions with young people will turn them away from drug abuse and so-called recreational drug use.

Susan Chappell, of Southwest Ranches, is a task force volunteer.

She lost her 22-year-old son, Bradley Johnson, to a prescription drug overdose in 2005 and since has been trying to educate young people about drug abuse. Chappell says her son received monthly prescriptions for OxyContin from a podiatrist in Broward County for about a year.

All he had to do was say his foot hurt, Chappell said.

"He would tell me, 'Mom, it's so easy,'" she said, visibly frustrated. "I'm not an addict, so I don't understand it, but I know that addiction is a disease."

Johnson, who got hooked on the pills in late 2002, had also received prescriptions for pain killers from a doctor in Miami-Dade, Chappell said.

He had gone through rehab but kept relapsing, Chappell said. When he wasn't grinding and then snorting the pills, he led a successful life as a computer technician.

On April 8, 2005, he fell asleep at a friend's house and never woke up, killed by a combination of oxycodone and alprazolam, an anti-anxiety medication also known as Xanax.

"I miss him every moment of every day," Chappell said.

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