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Crimes linked to abuse of legal drugs

By ROBERT NAPPER

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Prescription drug addiction has led to recent brazen crimes in Manatee County, and their abuse continues to be a life-threatening practice, authorities said Thursday.

Those crimes include two recent armed robberies of pharmacies, an effort to smuggle drugs into the Manatee jail and a public drug binge disrupted by police.

On Wednesday, Bradenton Police arrested three people, who were "in the middle of shooting" prescription drugs in a vehicle parked at a convenience store, according to reports.

At 2:11 a.m. Wednesday, two police officers walked up to a car illegally parked at the Marathon gas station in the 1800 block of Manatee Avenue East.

The officers found three people in the car "in the middle of shooting an unknown substance," reports state.

Anthony David Arvajal, 37, of Tampa, was in the driver's seat and police saw a syringe on the center console.

Two passengers in the backseat, Lorrie Ann Caudill, 38, and Jennie Patricia Brandt, 33, both of Sarasota, also had syringes next to them, the police reports said.

In the car, police found suspected oxycodone in the syringes and in pill form, along with a metal container with numerous unused syringes.

All three were charged with possession of a controlled substance without a prescription. Brandt and Caudill also face charges of possession of drug paraphernalia.

Bradenton Police Maj. Bill Tokajer said it's rare for police to capture people in the act of injecting drugs in a public place.

"It just shows where they are with their drug addiction," he said. "That they couldn't even wait until they were out sight to do their drugs."

Bradenton Police Maj. Bill Tokajer said authorities believe drug addiction also sent a Bradenton man on an armed robbery spree of two pharmacies on Dec. 5 and 6.

Bradenton Police captured Jason Dickerson, 26, running from an armed robbery of a CVS pharmacy, at 39th Street West and Manatee Avenue West, on Dec. 6.

In that robbery, CVS employees said he pointed a gun pharmacy workers and demanded a list of pills, according to police reports.

That robbery was less than 24 hours after Manatee County Sheriff's Office deputies say Dickerson robbed a Walgreens pharmacy, on Manatee Avenue West, just three blocks from the CVS.

"Again, it just shows the extent of his addiction," said Tokajer.

In another case, a 29-year-old woman was so worried about her boyfriend getting sick in jail from withdrawal from his methadone addiction that she risked her own freedom to get him prescription drugs, according to sheriff's reports.

Authorities say Amanda Rogers admitted to mailing her boyfriend methadone by placing it under stamps on letters she sent to the jail. She is now being held in the Manatee jail on a felony charge of introduction of contraband into a detention facility.

Officials say prescription drug abuse is not only a source of crime, but a major cause of death in Manatee and throughout the state.

A recent state report on drugs identified in corpses shows prescription drug abuse is on a deadly upward trend.

In the first six months of 2007, only heroin killed more people in Florida than the prescription drugs methadone and oxycodone, according to statistics in the report compiled by medical examiners throughout Florida.

In that period, deaths caused by oxycodone and hydrocodone increased 9.5 percent and 8.1 percent, respectively, compared to the first six months of 2006. Deaths caused by methadone increased over the same time by 3.7 percent.

Manatee County Public Safety Capt. Larry Leinhauser said overdoses and deaths caused by prescription drug abuse remain steady locally.

"It is not an everyday occurrence, but it remains very common," he said.

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