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Pain Pills Easy To Get, Hard To Regulate Online

By Joe Henderson

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TAMPA - Type "OxyContin" and "pharmacy" into your Internet search engine and watch what happens. Within seconds, you'll have links to thousands of Web sites promising easy access to the drug. The same goes for Vicodin or just about any other painkiller you can name.

These addictive drugs are strictly regulated by state and federal laws and are supposed to be available only through prescriptions. But with a credit card and a click or two on a computer, it's possible to bypass the system and have the medications delivered to your door.

And authorities say it is almost impossible to stop.

"Once you get addicted, you'll do whatever it takes to get the drugs," said Detective Karen Cain, of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. "And with the Net, I can't even begin to touch it" for enforcement.

Pain medication use can slow reaction time and impair driving.

"I'd say that 10 out of every 20 reports on DUI are going to have a narcotic involved," she said. "When people think of drug abuse, they think of things like cocaine and methamphetamine. They don't think of pain pills. But that's a drug, too."

Cain, a 25-year veteran of the force, is the only deputy assigned full time to investigate prescription pain medication fraud. It's a tough job. The explosion of Internet pharmacies — 84 percent of which don't require prescriptions, according to a University of Maryland study — makes it almost impossible to effectively police these drug shipments.

She said Florida lags states such as Louisiana and Kentucky, which have prescription drug monitoring programs that link emergency rooms and pharmacies. That gives law enforcement another weapon against those who obtain prescriptions from several doctors, a practice called doctor-shopping.

For the past four years, state Sen. Burt Saunders, R-Naples, tried unsuccessfully to create a statewide electronic prescription database. The network would make it easier for pharmacists, medical staff and law enforcement agencies to root out doctor-shoppers and physicians who overprescribe addictive painkillers.

More than 30 states have similar databanks, but leaders of the Florida House rejected the idea, citing concerns about the potential release of patient information.

Lawmakers passed a scaled-down measure last year that stopped short of creating the database. Saunders said last week that he plans to meet with House leaders before the next legislative session to see whether they have warmed to the idea.

Law enforcement officials say that database could cut in half the number of prescription drug overdoses. In Florida, roughly six people a day die from illegally used prescription drugs, according to the state Office of Drug Control.

"We will eventually get this bill passed," said Saunders, who took up the cause after the son of a close friend died from an OxyContin overdose.

"That would help us so much," Cain said.

For now, Cain said, she relies on tips from pharmacies about people who are trying to beat the system.

The department has made 84 arrests on the painkiller beat this year: 13 for doctor-shopping to obtain prescriptions, plus 71 cases of prescription fraud. She called prescription medication "the drugs of choice" of those arrested.

"You've got your soccer moms, you've got athletes, and you've got junkies on the street," she said. "It could happen to your neighbor next door, or it could happen to your pastor. It could be the little kid that goes to high school who gets into mom's cabinet and finds Xanax or OxyContin and gets addicted. Addiction will affect any walk of life — athlete or not."

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