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Effort takes aim at 'doctor shopping' in Florida

Prescription drugs are top cause of overdoses, officials say

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South Florida and state officials will try a new tack next year to combat "doctor shopping," the growing practice in which a patient goes from doctor to doctor amassing pain pills for abuse or sale.

They will launch a high-profile campaign for a statewide computer database to log every prescription for potentially lethal narcotic pills and antidepressants, to help doctors and officials spot multiple and suspect prescriptions.

But if the state Legislature rejects the idea, as it has for six years, database advocates said they also will push to set up an experimental system in Broward and perhaps Palm Beach counties.

"This problem is too big for us to let it go. We have got to get this done," said Bill Janes, the governor's drug control chief, who is among the group pushing the initiative. "You and I could start in the southern part of the state and stop at a doctor in every town and get a huge supply to sell."

That happened in September 2006 when Broward Sheriff's undercover officers arrested Sunrise retiree Paul S. Knox, who they said sold them narcotic pills he obtained by visiting several physicians to complain of pain.

Knox, 73, charged \$925 for more than 100 oxycodone and hydrocodone pain pills when he met agents in a parking lot, police said. He pleaded no contest last month to one count of trafficking and was sentenced to 15 months in state prison, court records show.

Legislators have shot down the drug database proposal every year since 2002. Some opponents say the system may jeopardize the privacy of patients taking pain pills if hackers or others got access.

Database supporters had taken a low-key approach, but say they will turn up the heat next year because prescription drugs have become the leading cause of overdoses in Florida and drug dealers now doctor-shop to get supplies, mainly in South Florida.

As part of the push, relatives of overdose victims will appeal to legislators. Among them: Hillsboro Beach credit counselor Nancy Levy, whose ex-husband, businessman Ross Levy, overdosed on pain pills in April 2006, an autopsy showed.

Levy, 47, died about a week after completing drug addiction treatment in Georgia and California. His medical records show he had received hundreds of pain and anxiety pills monthly since 1998 from several Boca Raton doctors. He got so many that when he died, police said, they found in his home vials with 1,750 pills prescribed to him dating to 2000.

"I went with him to see [a doctor]," Nancy Levy said. "She asked him, 'What do you want today?' and wrote out a prescription for whatever he wanted. They were writing so much, he was able to stockpile it."

Although no one counts doctor-shopping cases, law enforcement officials said the practice is involved in a growing number of overdoses. Of the 7,741 Floridians who died last year of drug-related causes, 63 percent were found to have prescription drugs in their bodies, although those medications were not necessarily the cause of death.

Palm Beach County has been a hotbed of prescription drug abuse, with 270 overdoses so far this year, up from 218 last year, said Gary Martin, a sheriff's homicide detective who monitors overdoses and favors a database.

"What's going on now is not working," Martin said.

Drug addicts, including those who start as legitimate pain patients, can fool doctors or find unscrupulous ones to get pills, police say. Detectives said they have seen a rise in drug dealers paying people to doctor shop, some coming from the 33 states that have computer systems to monitor pain drugs. Florida is the largest state without a system.

A database "won't stop all the doctor shopping, but it will definitely slow it down," said Robert Banuchi, a Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office narcotics agent.

State Rep. Jack Seiler, D-Wilton Manors, who will sponsor the bills, said the biggest hurdle will be money. In a very tight budget year, he said it will be tough to find \$2.3 million to set up the statewide database, especially after a 2002 offer from OxyContin-maker Purdue Pharma to supply the system expired in 2004.

Last week, Broward County commissioners expressed doubts about a local pilot program, saying they did not want to pay for it. None has been proposed in Palm Beach County, but several officials there said they would explore the idea.

The group pushing for a database includes police, judges, prosecutors, drug-abuse officials, physicians and family groups. They are trying to line up federal and

private grants to cover the costs, said group organizer Joel Kaufman, director of the United Way's Broward County Commission on Substance Abuse.

Janes said he and others met with the state secretaries of health and health care administration, urging them to push more vocally than in the past for a database. He also is enlisting the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

"We're trying to overcome the concerns of those particular [legislators] who say they don't want a police state," said state Appellate Judge Melanie May, who is part of the initiative. "If we can't, let's do a [local] pilot program and see if it makes detractors feel more comfortable."

This year's push will be aided for the first time by an influential lobbyist, South Florida's Ron Book, who said he knows someone who has struggled with diet pills.

With no database, the state is trying other methods to track prescriptions for addictive drugs. Doctors are being asked to use tamper-resistant prescription pads, which are harder to forge. State Medicaid doctors must use them.

Also, the Legislature this year assigned the Agency for Health Care Administration to urge doctors to "e-prescribe" by using computers instead of paper so prescriptions can be tracked.

So far fewer than 10 percent of doctors prescribe online, far from enough to detect doctor shopping, said Christopher Sullivan, the agency's head of health information technology.

Even if every doctor prescribed online, Janes said the system would still miss some prescriptions not covered by insurance and paid with cash. Cash is favored by drug abusers, dealers and unscrupulous physicians, he said.

"In five to 10 years, this will probably be a way that doctor shopping can be prevented," Janes said. "I can't wait five years. We need the database."

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