

[Back](#)

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St. Albans doctors try to tackle drug abuse

Vermont Press Bureau

Staff Report

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ST. ALBANS — A group of Franklin County doctors is trying to fight prescription drug abuse by making patients seeking pain drugs sign a contract, requiring them to undergo random urine testing and provide information about their medical care.

They say the "narcotics contract" could help find people seeking to abuse powerful pain drugs like OxyContin.

"It's one thing for us to try and diagnose a problem, but to try to figure out whether a patient is actually telling the truth, it becomes not a diagnosis but an investigation," said Dr. Edward Haak, director of emergency medicine at Northwestern Medical Center in St. Albans.

The move comes as St. Albans grapples with an opiate drug problem. Crime has increased and substance abuse counselors say the number of people seeking drug treatment has doubled in the past year.

Haak said he's witnessed the effects of prescription drug abuse in the hospital's emergency department.

"We've had more holes in the walls from people kicking because they weren't getting meds," he said. "I had to do something, and I couldn't do it myself."

The hospital boosted security because of the increased risks from people struggling with drug addiction, said JoAnn Manahan, the head nurse in the emergency department.

To deal with the problem, a group of health care providers started meeting two years ago to talk about what to do. They found that 86 percent of the area's medical community had no real training in managing pain drugs, and 72 percent were not comfortable identifying and treating opiate addiction.

The group, called the Franklin/Grand Isle Chronic Pain/Narcotics Community Forum, has since organized public meetings on the problem for health care providers.

The group is seeking a grant to help establish a communications network, including the narcotics contract concept, to snag possible prescription drug abusers.

The plan would augment a state Department of Health program to create a statewide database for physicians and pharmacists that will track drug prescriptions, Haak said.

The group also plans a community forum on the issue in St. Albans in May.
