

News

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As prescriptions increase, so do methadone deaths

By **Eric Eyre**
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - Researchers seem to have found a possible explanation for the dramatic jump in methadone-related drug overdose deaths across West Virginia in recent years: The number of methadone prescriptions for pain also increased significantly during the same time period.

The increase in doctor's methadone prescriptions mirrors the 250 percent rise in methadone deaths during a recent five-year period, according to the preliminary results of a study expected to be released next month.

West Virginia leads the nation in methadone-related deaths per capita.

"We found a direct correlation with the increase in methadone prescribing and methadone-associated deaths," said Dr. Michael O'Neil, a University of Charleston pharmacy professor, who spoke Wednesday during the state's annual "Share the Vision" substance abuse conference at the Charleston Civic Center. "We have a huge problem. We have deaths. We have inappropriate prescribing."

The study examined prescription data from retail pharmacies. The increase in prescriptions didn't include methadone obtained at clinics that treat heroin addicts.

"Most patients receiving methadone from a community pharmacy are receiving it for pain management, not for treatment of opiate addiction," said O'Neil, chairman of the West Virginia Controlled Substance Advisory Board.

A 2006 Charleston Gazette investigation revealed that methadone is responsible for the deaths of more people nationwide than any other prescription narcotic.

The newspaper found the daily methadone dose approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for pain could kill some patients - including some who took methadone exactly as their doctors told them to. In response, the FDA issued a public warning about methadone and cut the approved dose by more than half.

O'Neil noted Wednesday that drug-related overdose deaths in West Virginia more than tripled between 2001 and 2006. Prescription narcotics were at least partly responsible for 40 percent of those deaths, O'Neil said.

During the past year, pain reliever misuse increased 16 percent in West Virginia, O'Neil said.

Recent investigations have shown that addicts continue to abuse powerful painkillers across West Virginia.

Many addicts are switching from illegal drugs, such as heroin, to prescription medications, including hydrocodone and diazepam, O'Neil said.

The drugs are often stolen, obtained with forged prescriptions or purchased over the Internet. Other addicts see multiple doctors and request the same pain medication, a practice called "doctor shopping."

Some health-care professionals also are reportedly illegally selling and distributing the painkillers, said O'Neil, who directs the University of Charleston's Center of Excellence for the Study and Prevention of Drug Diversion and

Substance Abuse.

Also Wednesday, O'Neil cited an increase in "pharming" parties in West Virginia during which young adults steal prescription medications, meet up and mix large numbers of pills in a bowl before randomly taking them.

"They're using things they don't even know what they are," O'Neil said.

O'Neil's Controlled Substance Advisory Board includes health professionals, state legislators, social workers and law enforcement officers. The group has started a pilot project designed to curb prescription drug abuse and diversion in five Southern West Virginia counties. The program provides education to physicians and patients.

Reach Eric Eyre at erice...@wvgazette.com or 348-4869.