

Prescription Painkillers: The Legal Killers

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More Florida residents died from drug related deaths than traffic accidents in 2007, two and a half times more.

Medical experts say it's time to cut down on preventable deaths from overdoses of prescription painkillers, stop pharmacy shopping and close down so-called "pill mills."

Dr. Rafael Miguel, director of the pain management program at the University of South Florida says, "The State of Florida is a complete embarrassment as far as drug dispensing to drug dealers and to abusers."

Bill Janes, head of the Florida Board of Drug Control says, "8,620 drug related deaths a year mandate that we take some action."

The 8-thousand, 6-hundred and 20 drug-related deaths in 2007 was 11 percent more than in 2006. The death toll continues to rise.

Tina Sobek's son suffered a back injury that led to an addiction to painkillers. Twenty-six year old David Sobek of New Port Richey died in March from an accidental overdose. he'd consumed a common cocktail: methadone, oxycontin and xanax. A year earlier, David's fiance, Melissa Edgell, also died from an accidental overdose of prescription pills. They left a five-year old daughter.

Sobek asks, "How many more people have to die, how many more mothers or anybody has to feel the way I felt, from losing someone? I never want anybody to feel this way."

ABC Action News investigative reporter Matthew Schwartz has conducted a four month investigation into the abuse of prescription drugs. We poured through hundreds of autopsy reports, talked to victims, former addicts, doctors, pharmacists, and the state's drug czar in Tallahassee, Bill Janes.

Janes is working hard for passage of proposed prescription drug monitoring plan, which would create a database so doctors, pharmacists and law enforcement can see a patient's prescription drug history on a computer. "There are many things that must be done to control prescription drugs. This is a critical first step that Florida must take."

Dr. Miguel of USF told us, "Nothing in our state will do more to decrease the ready availability of drugs in our schools and our streets, than this program."

Supporters say the monitoring program would put some doctors and drugstores under a microscope.

Bob Parrado is one of the nine members on the Florida Board of Pharmacy. He said, "We need to find out why these doctors are prescribing these large quantities, why some pharmacies are willing to fill these large quantities without any question, and why these people are not being prosecuted."

Thirty-eight states have drug monitoring programs, but Florida lawmakers have failed to pass one for six years.

Janes says, "I believe it's a travesty, an outrage that we have not passed it."

Supporters partly blame the bill's previous failures on lobbyists representing drugstores, afraid they'd lose money if fewer prescriptions are written. but some opponents cite privacy concern, saying the monitoring would be another example that Big Brother is watching, invading our privacy. Sally House is the chief lobbyist for the Florida Retail Federation, which represents hundreds of drugstores.

House told us, "Any time you have a data download or data transfer, you risk some of that information falling into the public arena, into the wrong hands." House added, however, that she might be in favor of the plan depending on how it's worded.

State Senator Mike Fasano (R-New Port Richey) is the bill's co-sponsor. Fasano says, "When we see deaths in the state of Florida, people dying, because of, not from illegal drugs but legal drugs, the state, the community, has to take action."

Many of the plan's most outspoken opponents during its six years of failure are no longer members of the legislature, leading to speculation that the bill will pass in the next legislative session, which starts in March of 2009.

Meanwhile, Tina Sobek mourns her son and his fiance, and hopes for the bill's passage.

"The thing is," she says, "people are dying."

Law enforcement says while the drug monitoring bill is a step in the right direction, a bigger part of the problem are some doctors who recklessly over-prescribe medications. Tonight (Tuesday), we investigate one bay area doctor who's accused of writing prescriptions for more than "what ails you". That's tonight at 11.

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