

Fentanyl Abuse Deadlier Than Methadone

Daniel Riordan

Times-Union Staff Writer

Tuesday, December 16, 2008

Over time, the incidence of prescription drug abuse has increased, and during that time the drugs people choose to abuse have become more potent.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the abuse of prescription pain killers ranks only behind marijuana as the country's most prevalent drug used.

Vicodin, Oxycontin and methadone, among a variety of other prescription drugs, have had their moments as the "in" drug of the moment.

Now it appears that fentanyl is becoming the drug of choice.

From high school and college kids to people in their 50s, fentanyl is seeing an increase in popularity.

Fentanyl is an opioid pain killer that is approximately 81 times more potent than morphine. Fentanyl is so strong that it is prescribed in micrograms rather than grams.

When abused, the user often takes a patch with a gel inside, cuts it open, then places a part of it in their mouth as if it's chewing tobacco.

Most patches that are prescribed to people with chronic pain, such as cancer patients, are three-day patches, which release the drug over a two-day to seven-day period.

Most patches prescribed are of the three-day variety.

Therefore, if someone chooses to abuse fentanyl and takes half of a three-day patch and uses it, they have put 1.5 days worth of a substance that is 81 times more potent than morphine in their system.

People who use items such as fentanyl properly have also built up a drug tolerance over time.

The problem with people who use it recreationally is they don't have such a tolerance and also tend to mix it with alcohol or other drugs, which leads to death by "multiple drug toxicity."

The half life of fentanyl lasts for 17 hours, not as much as methadone, and that leads to abusers to stack doses, which leads to deadly amounts of the drug in the body's system.

How quickly the body absorbs the drug is also dependent on the size of the person as well as the placement of the patch.

Fentanyl can lead to depressed lung capacity, pulmonary adema, coma and brain swelling.

In January of this year, the Times-Union released an article citing the dangers of the abuse, not properly prescribed usage, of methadone.

In 2007, 12 people in Kosciusko County died due to multiple drug toxicity with methadone being a factor.

County Coroner John Sadler said his office sees spikes of deaths caused by overdoses and that getting the word out about the dangers of prescription drug abuse is paramount.

"We'll see a spike, then when information is put out there we'll go six months without an overdose," said Sadler. "Then it wears off and starts again."

This year, three have died with fentanyl being a factor.

The most high profile of those three cases was Zachary England, 27, Leesburg, whose death not only led to dozens of letters to the editor but also caused his parents to act.

"I think a lot of parents are naive," said Zachary's mom, Mary England, with husband Ron. "I was never naive."

During a meeting with Sadler, Warsaw Police Department Detective Tony Faucett and a drug task force officer at the England's home, the topic of fentanyl abuse was discussed.

Illicit fentanyl use has become prevalent in big cities, such as Chicago and Detroit, but isn't immune to smaller communities like those in Kosciusko County.

"We know people who said that it's really popular at colleges," said Mary England.

While fentanyl has become a new party drug, the effects of its abuse are deadly.

"If we can save one person from this drug then it's worth it," said Mary England.

After the holidays, the Englands plan to get together with the WPD and speak to DARE classes to lend a personal story to the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

"I want to commend Ron and Mary for what they're doing," said Sadler. "When people hear stories like this, that's what can get somebody to stop."

Lawsuits involving the safety of the the fentanyl patch have sprung up in the last three years and there have also been recalls of some patches.

PAGE 3

Parents speak out after losing son to overdoseBy Tim Robertson, Times-Union Staff Writer

Ron and Mary England remember their son, Zach, as someone who loved people.

"He never knew a stranger," said Mary. "He was always looking out for people, helping people out."

Ron said his son worked with him in his construction business for eight years. "He was a good kid," said Ron, "but, he was addicted to something."

On Nov. 22, an overdose of a prescription painkiller called fentanyl took Zach's life at the age of 27.

As they grieve the loss of their son, the Englands say they want to use the experience to help others. They say that's what Zach would do.

"If this would have happened to one of Zach's friends, he would have come to me and said, 'Mom, we have got to do something about this,'" said Mary.

Mary said she has decided to become a spokesperson to spread word about the dangers of abusing fentanyl.

Monday, the Englands got together at their Leesburg home with Kosciusko County Coroner John Sadler, an undercover officer, and Warsaw Police Department Detective Tony Faucett, to talk about Zach's death and the drug that killed him.

Mary said she's spent some time researching fentanyl and the ways it is abused. She said she even visited some online chat rooms and talked to college students who use fentanyl as a party drug.

"They think it's a great high," she said. "Most of them have no idea how dangerous it is."

The undercover officer said that's one of the biggest dangers prescription drugs can pose when abused.

"They don't know what they're dealing with," he said. "It'll kill you just as fast as meth or cocaine if it's used wrong."

Fentanyl comes in patches meant to be applied to the skin to treat chronic pain. It is a highly addictive opiate, 80 times more potent than morphine. The undercover officer said abusers of the drug often obtain the patches by stealing them or buying them on the black market. Patches are designed to slowly release the drug over a period of three to seven days.

"What kids are doing is cutting them and squeezing the gel out," said Mary. "They put them on the roofs of their mouths."

The result, said Sadler, is often a concentrated dose, much higher than the body can tolerate.

"With patches, you can't cut one up and know what the dose is," said Sadler.

He said the long half-life of the drug means that abusers often take more before their first dose is out of their system.

"Just because the buzz wears off, doesn't mean the stuff isn't still in your system," Sadler said.

Because fentanyl is a prescription drug, the undercover officer said abusers often assume it's safe.

Sadler said the assumption that fentanyl is safe to abuse couldn't be further from the truth. While street drugs are often cut with other substances and diluted, he said, prescription drugs are abused at full strength.

"This stuff is pure and it will kill you in a heartbeat," he said.

The Englands said they knew their son had had problems with drug abuse in the past.

"We were not naive parents saying, 'Oh no, not my son,'" said Mary.

She said, at one point, she helped her son detox and he was able to get off drugs for a while. However, during the last few months of Zach's life, his parents said he was acting strangely.

"The last few weeks of his life, his dad and I noticed he was more irritable, in a bad mood," Mary said.

The Englands put Zach on a waiting list for a rehabilitation center in Holland, Mich.

"We were waiting for him to come to us for help, like he had before," Mary said. "He was an adult. You can't force someone to get help."

However, the Englands said they had no idea their son was addicted to fentanyl.

"We didn't have a clue what that stuff was," said Ron.

The Englands said they want to speak out to help raise awareness for young people, parents and all sectors of the community. Mary said she plans to meet with the local DARE program and also hopes to begin a group dedicated to raising the awareness of the dangers of abusing fentanyl. The Englands said they also want to help other parents be vigilant.

"We need to know the warning signs to look for," said Mary. "As a parent, I didn't see the warning signs."

The Englands said they are still grieving for their son, but speaking out has been comforting to them.

"If we can save one life in Kosciusko County, it's worth it," said Ron.

Mary agreed. "If I can help one mother not go through what I'm going through, it's worth it," she said.

Sadler and the undercover officer said it is somewhat rare for the family of an overdose victim to be willing to speak out about their loss. They said the awareness the Englands will promote will go a long way in helping fight drug abuse in the area.

"I'd really like to commend Ron and Mary for speaking out on the issue so close to the event," Sadler said. "That's what it takes, it takes someone being an activist about it to get it out."

Mary said, even at Zach's funeral, she began to realize the importance of getting good information out about the dangers of abusing drugs.

"I had six young people who came up to me, who I know used with my son," she said. "They said, 'We can't believe this happened to Zach; he was a safe drug user.' I want to get word to people, there is no safe drug using."