

Coroner sees rise in prescription drug overdoses

By *JOSHUA WOLFSON*
Star-Tribune staff writer

Five years ago, fatal overdoses in Natrona County usually stemmed from drugs made in clandestine labs or sold on the street.

These days, the drugs that kill are just as likely to come from a pharmacy.

Fatal prescription drug overdoses appear to be on the rise, according to Chief Deputy Coroner Gary Hazen. Instead of methamphetamine, the culprits today are medications like OxyContin and Methadone.

"The drug of choice has changed from street drugs to pharmaceuticals," Hazen said. "It's rare that we have meth deaths. Now it's all pills."

In the past week, the coroner's office has investigated three deaths thought to have resulted from prescription drug overdoses.

All three people were in their 30s. All three had ingested opiates -- drugs that contain opium or its derivatives. Only one is being investigated as a possible suicide.

"This week has been horrible for us," Hazen said.

Last year, six people died from drug overdoses in Natrona County, according to records provided by the coroner's office. Only one tested positive for methamphetamine use. Between the other five cases, tests found opiates, alcohol, cannabinoids, sedatives and Methadone -- a synthetic narcotic commonly used to treat heroin addiction.

The prescription drug problem isn't limited to the Casper area. The National Institute on Drug Abuse has called prescription drug abuse a growing health problem across the country. An estimated 48 million people have used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons, according to a report by the institute.

Abuse of narcotic pain relievers can slow or stop a person's breathing, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Abuse of sedatives can lead to seizures, respiratory depression and decreased heart rate.

Hazen's experience seems to fit with the observations of Casper police and substance abuse experts, who see prescription drug abuse rising at a time when methamphetamine use appears on the decline.

Prescription drugs have even become a target in home thefts, said Casper police Sgt. Mark Trimble.

"We are seeing a pretty sizable upswing of people being arrested for that type of controlled substance," he said.

Opiate-based painkillers, such as OxyContin, are the most prevalent of the abused prescription drugs that police come across, Trimble added.

In addition to theft, prescription drugs can be obtained through fraud and a phenomenon called "doctor shopping." With doctor shopping, a person obtains multiple prescriptions from different doctors or dentists, Hazen said.

Other Wyoming counties have also experience prescription drug overdoses, although the overall number of overdoses remains small. For example, Albany and Campbell counties reported deaths last year due to prescription drug overdoses.

"I have seen, just in my tenure, at least a couple of deaths that were directly attributable to prescribed pain medications," said Albany County Coroner Thomas Furgeson, who took office last year. "One was most definitely an overdose. The other, the circumstances preclude being able to say definitively if a painkiller was the culprit. But it was a contributor to the death."

However, Furgeson cautioned that the numbers in his county were too small to draw conclusions about overdose trends.

Reach Joshua Wolfson at (307) 266-0582 or at josh.wolfson@trib.com.