

Another pain medication proving deadly

By Maureen Boyle

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- Methadone deaths skyrocketed in the state as doctors — reluctant to prescribe the highly addictive OxyContin for pain — are turning to the drug long used to treat heroin addiction.

Methadone overdose deaths in the state rose from 86 in 2005 to 146 in 2006, according to preliminary numbers provided to The Enterprise.

Locally, there were 11 methadone deaths from Aug. 31, 2006, to Aug. 31, 2007, based on a review by The Enterprise of death certificates filed in city and town clerk offices in 28 communities.

The increase, several said, is directly tied to an increase in prescriptions written by doctors who are using methadone to treat pain.

Some of the methadone is also being diverted onto the street and into the hands of addicts or people who believe they can use the drug to get high.

“It is more powerful than people really realize,” said Robin Miller of Burlington, whose 20-year-old son died of a methadone overdose two years ago.

One group, comprised of relatives and friends of methadone overdose victims, is trying to convince the federal government to put more controls on methadone and spotlight problems with the drug.

“The doctors just think it is like any other pain medication,” said Melissa Zuppari, whose fiance died of a methadone overdose and who is a founder of Harmd Inc., a national group pushing for tighter regulations of methadone.

The number of deaths tied to methadone has been rising sharply since 2003, when concerns about the highly addictive pain killer OxyContin increased. There were 31 methadone-related deaths in 2003, up from 12 in 2002.

Joanne Peterson, founder of Learn to Cope, a support group for parents of opiate addicted children, said she fears methadone could wind up replacing OxyContin as the new threat on the street.

“The use has to be administered very carefully and monitored or it is going to be another epidemic,” Peterson said.

The methadone found on the street is in tablet form — the type prescribed by doctors — not the liquid dispensed at methadone clinics.

Methadone was first synthesized by German scientists during World War II after the opium supply to Germany was cut off. It was brought to the United States in 1947 and has been primarily used to treat heroin addiction.

Colleen LaBelle, who serves as state director for opioid treatment programs at 15 community health centers, said some doctors may be turning to methadone in the wake of the controversy surrounding the use of OxyContin, the powerful and highly addictive pain killer linked to heroin use.

“It is a good pain medicine if it is used appropriately,” LaBelle said of methadone.

The increase in Massachusetts mirrors a national trend. The number of methadone deaths in the country rose from 786 in 1999 to 3,849 in 2005, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That comes as more methadone is distributed throughout the country.

In 2001, 1,894,061 grams of methadone were legally distributed to hospitals, pharmacies and doctors. That rose to 6,621,678 in 2006, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Methadone — in pill form — is also finding its way onto the street, but is not what those in the treatment field call the “drug of choice” by addicts.

“It is an alternative if they can't get their drug of choice,” said Jim Kenney, who once worked at a methadone clinic and is now program director for the High Point women's addiction treatment center in New Bedford. “It is not a drug of choice.”

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