

## Heath Ledger's death shows danger of mixing prescription pills

By Susan Abram, Staff Writer

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The 16-year-old wasn't famous.

But he died this week the same way actor Heath Ledger recently did - with a lethal mix of chemicals from prescription pills running through his veins and causing his young heart to stop while he slept.

"This is the third death like this I've had this year," said Cary Quashen, an addiction specialist who founded Action, a nonprofit support-group and crisis-counseling program for parents and teens across Los Angeles County.

"We deal with this every day, with kids flirting with their lives every day," Quashen said. "You don't hear about this until it's someone famous. People taking these drugs need to be educated on the consequences of what they are doing."

The news Wednesday that Ledger's death was caused by an accidental overdose of a combination of prescription drugs was not surprising to Quashen and others who specialize in drug-abuse treatment.

But Ledger's death is a reminder of how the mixture of painkillers and anti-anxiety and sleeping pills is killing increasing numbers of Americans - young and old, famous and obscure.

The actor died as a result of "acute intoxication" by the combined effects of oxycodone, hydrocodone, diazepam, temazepam, alprazolam and doxylamine, coroner's officials said Wednesday. He died in a New York City apartment Jan. 22. He was 28.

Drug-poisoning deaths, from substances obtained either legally or illegally, rose 68 percent in the United States from 1999 to 2004, according to the most recent data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The report found that "nearly all poisoning deaths in the United States are attributed to drugs, (and) most drug poisonings result from the abuse of prescription and illegal drugs."

### Diverse rise in deaths

Those living in the South were more likely to die of drug poisoning, and cases there were up 114 percent. And deaths among those ages 15 to 24 jumped 113 percent over the five-year period.

Deaths among women increased 103 percent in the same period, while those among whites increased 76 percent.

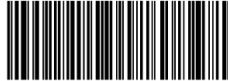
While such deaths are startling and real to those who treat drug addictions, they say public awareness soars only when a celebrity dies. A

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celebrity's death also casts a glaring light on the medical community for freely prescribing pills.

Dr. Joseph Haraszti, a psychiatrist and associate director at Las Encinas Hospital in Pasadena, has treated many celebrities and has seen how their lifestyles and fame can make access to legal and illegal drugs too easy for them.

"Part of it is that doctors are human, and they are fans," he said. "They like to ingratiate themselves with the celebrities, and it's very hard to say no to them."

This allows celebrities to go from one doctor to another without having to show past medical files or history, he said.

Haraszti said he believes Ledger died because he was self-medicating, using sleeping pills to calm the "mania" he might have been experiencing as he withdrew from prescription drugs, including painkillers and anti-anxiety drugs.

He reportedly was exhausted but couldn't sleep after finishing filming for the new Batman movie in his role as the Joker, a character he called a "psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy."

Haraszti said few understand the synergistic effect when opiates such as OxyContin interact with other drugs that work on the central nervous system.

"Opiates are very strong respiratory depressants and it doesn't take much to get a person over the edge," Haraszti said.

Ledger's father, Kim, noted Wednesday that the doses of drugs found in his son were low.

"While no medications were taken in excess, we learned today the combination of doctor-prescribed drugs proved lethal for our boy," he said in a printed statement. "Heath's accidental death serves as a caution to the hidden dangers of combining prescription medication, even at low dosage."

Haraszti and others who treat addiction blame easy access to pills and misinformation on the Internet about how to treat depression, fall asleep or get high. It's a trend seen again and again at local drug treatment centers.

Increasing numbers of those admitted to Sober College in Woodland Hills were addicted to pills. More than 70 people, all ages 17-26, are currently enrolled.

Sometimes, the medical community is to blame, said Loree Cohen, the facility's executive director.

"Among the older population, they get prescriptions from a variety of doctors without one person overseeing their medications and without thinking about how these drugs will (interact)," she said. "We're also seeing a lot of self-medicating. I think we live in a very

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stressful time. I think people have found a way to deal with their emotions, and doctors are feeling free in prescribing."

Pills easy to get

Among teens, prescription drugs are all about getting high.

"I had an addiction to OxyContin, to Xanax and other drugs," said a 19-year-old Sober College resident who called herself "Nicole." She said she started using when she was 13.

"I used because I loved the feeling," she said.

She said she got the drugs from her then-boyfriend. She said he knew people who went from doctor to doctor to get prescriptions. She also got pills in Mexico because they were cheap and legal.

Now sober for a year, she says society shouldn't place all the blame on the medical community.

"When a patient walks into the doctor's office, the doctor doesn't know if that person is really in pain or is an addict," she said. "Most doctors just want their patients not to feel pain."

But she said pills are easy to get - too easy.

"There's so many different ways to get what you want to get, to feel what you want," she said. "A lot of times, when people start

getting into that whole world, it's a lot easier to find pills. It also feels like pills are safer because doctors prescribe them. It's not like sticking a needle in your arm."

Quashen, who has counseled L.A. County teens and their parents for 25 years, said Ledger's death serves as a cautionary tale.

"I'm seeing more kids now that are using prescription drugs more than meth and Ecstasy combined - people don't have a clue on the chemical reaction of what they are using," she said.

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