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County cracks down on ODs

By [JANE MUSGRAVE](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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WEST PALM BEACH — When celebrities like Anna Nicole Smith and Heath Ledger die from drug overdoses, it's often viewed as simply another tragic tale of Hollywood-fueled excess.

Unfortunately, according to Palm Beach County sheriff's Detective Gary Martin, there is nothing unusual about dying from taking a lethal combination of prescription drugs. Further, he said, most victims are neither rich, glamorous nor known much beyond their small circle of family and friends.

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Overdose deaths

Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office stats on the estimated 322 people who died of drug overdoses last year:

Average age: 40.4 years

Male: 69.6 percent

White: 42.2 percent

Death ruled suicide: 15.6 percent

History of substance abuse: 84.4 percent

Others present when person overdosed: 53.3 percent
The worst five

Top five drugs found during autopsies:

- Methadone: 80
- Cocaine: 75
- Oxycodone: 64
- Xanax: 60
- Diazepam: 31

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would get a boost from a state law that would establish a prescription tracking system like those in 37 other states.

However, despite backing from doctors and medical groups and the promise of federal money to establish the tracking program, the legislature has repeatedly rejected the idea.

Sen. Burt Saunders, R-Naples, who first filed the legislation four years ago after a friend's son died from an OxyContin overdose, says the tracking system would give doctors the ability to monitor patients' drug usage and identify those who are doctor shopping. Any time they prescribed narcotics to anyone over the age of 16, doctors would send an electronic report to a state-maintained database that could be checked by other doctors.

An estimated 322 of those average folks died in the county last year from drug overdoses - more than three times the number that were murdered and almost 40 percent more than the 233 who died in traffic accidents.

While law enforcement officers fully investigate murders and traffic accidents to determine who is responsible, that hasn't routinely been the case with drug overdoses - until now.

As part of a three-pronged effort to reduce the number of people who die from such overdoses, detectives are reopening closed cases to look at all of the circumstances surrounding the deaths and to determine whether someone should be charged with a crime.

Detectives are casting a wide net, Martin told members of the county's Law Enforcement Planning Council on Thursday. They are analyzing such factors as how the person got the drugs, whether efforts were made to destroy evidence and whether illicit drugs were involved.

"We're aggressively looking at a broad range of statutes," he told the group of top cops from throughout the county. "If someone took an active roll in an overdose death, we're going to charge them."

The crackdown could snare doctors as well, he said. Detectives are keeping track of doctors who wrote prescriptions involved in drug overdoses. If the name of the same doctor keeps turning up on prescription bottles - something Martin said he expects will happen - that doctor can expect a visit from a person in uniform.

The Overdose Suppression Project began after studies consistently showed the county leads the state in drug overdose deaths. Martin said he was hoping the project



Opponents have killed the measure by raising concerns about patient privacy and worries that the information could be used as a hammer by overzealous police or could leak out and destroy people's reputations.

Despite assurances that it would be a crime to release any of the information without a court order or to anyone other than a doctor, the legislature is not convinced. Saunders has filed the bill again this year, but with no House companion it has little chance of passage.

In the meantime, Martin said officials are going to focus on enforcement and education. Public service announcements are planned. Leaflets have been prepared, warning of the dangers of methadone. Prescribed to help addicts cope with withdrawal, particularly from heroin, Martin said methadone has been implicated in a growing number of overdoses, including last year's death of tabloid celebrity Smith.

As with Smith, a combination of drugs was blamed for last month's death of Australian-born actor Ledger.

Many people don't realize the dangers of mixing different prescription drugs, even in small amounts, Martin said. Getting that message out is crucial to reducing deaths, he said.

That drug overdoses get so little attention fuels the problem, he said. It's viewed as a celebrity problem, or a troubled-kid problem.


Data shows that the average victim is about 40, white, and had a history of substance abuse.

He used that as evidence it could happen to anyone.

"Unfortunately, interest only bubbles up when someone famous dies," he said.

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