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## Parents in Orlando urge doctors to help curb painkiller abuse

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A group of parents stood shoulder-to-shoulder Tuesday outside an Orlando hotel, hoping to get the attention of the doctors inside at an international meeting on the treatment of pain.

With signs and pictures of their dead children, the parents said more must be done to curb and prevent the growing abuse of painkillers.

One of their targets: Florida's lack of a statewide database to track prescriptions of controlled substances. Lynn Locascio of Clearwater said such a system can help identify people who go from doctor to doctor in search of pain medicines. It also could expose physicians who overprescribe the drugs.

Thirty-five states have enacted laws requiring such systems, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Without one, Florida has become the land of plenty for prescription-drug abusers, Locascio said.

"We're the pill state; we're the black-market state," said Locascio, who runs a group called Parents Against Prescription Drug Addiction. "[A database system] could slow this down."

Government data show that an estimated 2.2 million people nationwide started using prescription painkillers for nonmedical purposes in 2006.

And about 25 percent of adults age 18 to 25 have used pain relievers inappropriately during their lifetimes, according to 2006 data from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Those statistics are not lost on the American Academy of Pain Medicine, which expects more than 1,000 pain specialists in Orlando this week for its annual meeting.

Prescription-drug abuse is a "public health crisis" that needs to be addressed by all the parties involved: patients, doctors, law-enforcement agencies, government and the drug industry, said Dr. Todd Sitzman, the academy's president.

But the public also needs to be sensitive to those living with chronic pain, he said. As the U.S. population ages, the numbers will grow of those struggling with pain from cancer, severe arthritis, back problems and other complaints.

"We acknowledge there is a major crisis with prescription-drug abuse and diversion," said Sitzman, a Mississippi cancer-pain specialist.

"But there is an equally important public health concern for under-treated chronic pain."

In the search for solutions, Sitzman said, statewide databases have not been shown to reduce prescription-drug abuse.

A database has not gotten much support in the Florida Legislature, where lawmakers have cited concerns about privacy. State Sen. Burt Saunders, a Republican from Naples, has submitted a bill this year to establish a tracking system.

Saunders considers the privacy concerns "bogus," saying that a secure, centralized database can be used to detect both doctors and patients who are caught up in prescription-drug abuse.

Pharmacists would enter data on every prescription they fill for controlled substances. Doctors could then access the information to identify people who have been to other physicians recently for similar medicines.

He estimates that it would cost about \$2 million to \$3 million to put such a system in place.

"It's cheaper to do this than to not do this," Saunders said. "We are spending a tremendous amount of money in our state Medicaid program for drugs that are ending up on the street and being abused."

Locascio and others hope the Legislature will take action this year. Her son used to bounce from doctor to doctor in search of painkillers but overcame his addiction after spending time in jail.

She considers herself lucky and mourns for parents who haven't been as fortunate.

Julie Rinaldi of Tampa held a poster Tuesday of her 17-year-old daughter, Sarah Nicole, who died in the summer of 2006 from an overdose of painkillers and other prescribed medicines.

Rinaldi said parents need to be aware of the dangers and talk to their children before it's too late.



"You need to take the blinders off," Rinaldi said. "Stop thinking this is not your problem, that it's somebody else's child, because it could be yours."

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