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Teens Abusing Prescription Drugs

Drug expert talks to Polk teenagers, finds national trend fits here too.

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THE LEDGER

LAKELAND | Prescription drug abuse among teens is bringing about the country's next cultural change and Polk County is no exception to the trend, drug expert Robert Stutman told about 100 parents and community members Monday.

It's the third cultural shift in the past 40 years, following LSD in the 1960s and cocaine in the 1980s, he said. And from speaking with a group of more than 300 students at George Jenkins High School Monday afternoon, Stutman, a former special agent with the Drug Enforcement Agency, found the trend to be no different in Polk teens.

Stutman spoke to parents at George Jenkins on Monday night and will speak to teachers, law enforcement and government officials today.

"They were well within the national norms," he said of the students he spoke to that afternoon. "But it is at the higher end."

About half of the students said they drank on a weekly basis and used marijuana on occasion, Stutman reported.

And in their talks with Stutman, which did not include any administrators or teachers, the students also asked about different drugs that were not recognizable by most parents in attendance, which included OC, X, Special K and purple sage to name a few.

"Rarely do kids just use alcohol," he said.

One of the most surprising things about his talk with the students: "I could not find any kids that could remember any drug-prevention programs below the high-school level other than the DARE program."

And in a study conducted by the U.S. Justice Department, the DARE program was found to be ineffective, he said.

Still, early education about the dangers of drugs and their long-term, lingering effects can be beneficial, he said.

The average age of first drug use has declined nationally from 16 1/2 years old in 1969 to 12 years and three months old in 2006. "Our kids are starting younger and younger every year," Stutman said.

Stutman said that based on his talk with George Jenkins students, the three most widely used drugs are Adderall, Ritalin and Oxycontin, all of which can be obtained through a doctor's prescription.

Adderall and Ritalin, used in treating attention deficit disorder, have the same effects as using methamphetamine, which is an active ingredient in both drugs, he said. Oxycontin, also known as OC, was designed as a pain killer for terminal cancer patients and is highly addictive.

Stutman spoke about the dangers associated with Oxycontin use and last year's death of former Jenkins student Kyle Hall. He said many students still aren't acknowledging how dangerous Oxycontin can be.

Polk Sheriff's Office investigators have said that they believe Hall obtained Oxycontin before going to a South Lakeland party in November where he died of an apparent drug overdose.

"This is the Heath Ledger disease," Stutman said. "These guys that die from overdose are not suicidal. They are just accidents."

Stutman provides a list of links to resources for parents and how they can talk to their children on his Web site at www.thestutmangroup.com.

"These are the kinds of things we can change," he told parents. "You guys have to do the work. And you can."

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