

Addicts, dealers plunder pharmacy shelves

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Last year, a man with gauze wrapped around his head and ketchup smeared on his face barged into a Walgreens in Holiday, announced he had a gun and demanded prescription painkillers.

Three months later, a Citrus County paramedic waving a knife jumped the counter at a Spring Hill CVS and demanded OxyContin.

That same day, a man broke into a Pinellas Park doctor's office and punched through the wall to get into an adjoining pharmacy.

Pharmacy robberies and burglaries are on the rise, police say, attributing it to a surge in prescription drug addiction and abuse.

In most cases, the robbers ignore the till and ask just for pills.

"They tell them exactly what they want in almost every case," said Sgt. Michael Holbrook, supervisor of the Pinellas sheriff's robbery unit. "They tell them they want oxies, they want Xanax, hydrocodones."

Pinellas sheriff's detectives investigated three pharmacy robberies from 2002 to 2004, but 15 from 2005 to 2007. The agency has investigated three pharmacy robberies so far this year.

Many robbers are addicts, but some are dealers, police say. Pharmacy stickups or break-ins can net thousands of pills that can be sold on the street for about \$1 a milligram. At that rate, a 120-count bottle of 80 milligram pills can sell for nearly \$10,000.

A *St. Petersburg Times* series published last month reported that about 500 people fatally overdosed on prescription drugs in the Tampa Bay area in 2007 — triple the deaths from illicit drugs like cocaine and heroin.

Statewide, the death toll from prescription overdoses was on pace for nearly 2,000 people in 2007. Final figures still are being compiled.

The *Times* studied two years of autopsy and investigative reports generated in nearly 800 Tampa Bay area deaths. Those who fatally overdosed are a complex mixture of substance abusers, pain patients and people with psychological problems.

While some received legitimate prescriptions from doctors, others resorted to prescription fraud, doctor shopping or illegal Internet sites to get their drugs.

Still others used force.

In June 2003, Michael Gilmartin walked into a Belleair drugstore with a ski mask on his head and a realistic-looking toy gun. He demanded OxyContin.

Outside, his girlfriend, Indi Barringer, acted as a lookout. She didn't notice the marked Belleair police cruiser parked five spaces away.

The officer, who was inside the drugstore, saw the robbery unfold. He shot Gilmartin in the shoulder.

Gilmartin and Barringer were arrested for robbery. He was sentenced to 27 months in prison. She got probation.

Two years later, Gilmartin found Barringer, 31, dead in their home. She had overdosed on methadone, which is increasingly used to treat pain, and cocaine.

In another case in April 2005, Clearwater resident Susan Chiccino plowed her husband's Chevy Suburban into a Safety Harbor pharmacy's front door. She hopped out and filled a pail with pill bottles. Deputies stopped her before she could flee. She was charged with burglary and placed in an intervention program.

A year later, Chiccino, 46, died of an overdose of oxycodone, morphine and cocaine.

People seeking prescription drugs aren't just targeting pharmacies. They're also burglarizing homes where they know prescriptions are kept or robbing people after they get their pills.

Crimes committed to gain prescription drugs also are increasing nationwide, said Capt. Richard Conklin, commander of investigations for the Stamford Police Department in Connecticut.

He oversees a Web site that helps law enforcement officials track trends and share information about suspects in pharmacy robberies and burglaries. The site, which offers rewards for information, was launched about five years ago by Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin.

Conklin said most of the robberies are committed by addicts. But he said more sophisticated burglars travel from town to town looking for pharmacies to break into, then flush the pills onto the black market.

"They chop a hole in the roof and lower themselves down like in *Mission: Impossible*, and they don't set off an alarm," he said.

Conklin said more pharmacies are installing surveillance cameras and taking other steps to protect themselves.

In October, Seminole pharmacist Dr. Mina Yousef was robbed when a man entered his store, Trinity Pharmacy, ordered him to the ground and told employees to fill a black duffel bag with pain pills. The robber escaped. No one was hurt.

On Feb. 25, Yousef was the target of another robbery. A man who had been a customer pulled out a syringe and demanded drugs. Yousef led the man to the back storage area and locked him inside. The man was arrested.

Yousef, whose wife is expecting their first child, says he has taken measures to tighten security at the pharmacy.

He said the holdups make him wonder if he made the right career choice.

"It's getting scarier and scarier," he said. "We need to put a stop to this."

Bill Stivers, training and education director for the National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators, said robberies will decline if drug abuse is curbed.

"The amount of robberies — that's a result of the intensity of the addiction," he said.

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