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Drug deaths surpass traffic fatalities
Medical examiner: Methadone top cause

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The Associated Press

Mar 17, 2008

More people are dying of drug overdoses in New Hampshire than in car crashes, with methadone the leading cause of death in most of the cases.

The number of overdose deaths has surpassed traffic deaths for the past two years, according to the state medical examiner, Dr. Thomas Andrew. "That's insane," Andrew said. "That's crazy."

The state had 129 traffic deaths and 168 overdose deaths in 2007. Methadone was to blame in 57 percent of the drug deaths.

In 2006, there were 127 traffic deaths and 142 drug overdose deaths, with methadone involved in 53 percent.

Those rising figures are in keeping with a trend recently reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which says New Hampshire is tied for fourth in the nation in methadone-related deaths based on statistics from 2005.

Methadone is prescribed to help addicts overcome heroin addiction and as a painkiller. Officials say it is not the liquid methadone dispensed to addicts at clinics that is causing the overdose deaths but the tablets prescribed by doctors to relieve pain.

In Laconia, Police Chief Michael Moyer has created a task force with the Belknap County Sheriff's Department to investigate unsolved methadone cases and conduct education and outreach programs in local schools. He says the drug has devastated families.

"We've been seeing dead bodies, unfortunately," he said. "We had eight people die in Laconia in the last year."

Prosecuting people who willfully sell methadone is difficult, said Senior Assistant Attorney General Jane Young, who works with the New Hampshire Drug Task Force.

"It's been challenging to prosecute these cases because there are often multiple drugs in a person's system," she said.

Also, the overdose cases she's seen usually involve a person giving away, rather than selling, methadone pills, Young said.

"From this office, we have not see the trafficking of it, although we know it's there," she said.

Methadone in pill form is less expensive than other prescribed painkillers, such as OxyContin and Vicodin. For example, it can cost \$5.50 per OxyContin pill in a 30-pill prescription. Drug dealers may sell those for \$40 each, Andrew said.

A 5-milligram methadone tablet, however, can cost 33 cents each in a typical prescription, and they often are sold for \$10 each on the street, Andrew said.

Ray McGarty, executive director of Southeastern New Hampshire Services at the Strafford County complex in Dover, said methadone pills have become part of society's "garbage pail" of drugs, alongside cocaine, heroin and marijuana. Southeastern is a residential substance-abuse treatment center.

He said methadone is a synthetic narcotic that will not get someone as high as heroin. But people can get a similar high by taking methadone while drinking alcohol and taking other drugs, McGarty said.

Andrew and Moyer said they believe New Hampshire should create an electronic prescription monitoring program that would prevent people from getting multiple methadone prescriptions from different doctors and having them filled at various pharmacies. While it would not be a panacea, "it would be a step in the right direction," Andrew said.

Attempts to pass such a bill in the Legislature have stalled because some lawmakers have cited privacy concerns, he said. But Andrew said the information already is stored at pharmacies and doctor's offices.

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