

Tampa forum looks at prescription drug safety

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Published Tuesday, March 18, 2008 11:22 PM

TAMPA — All across Florida, people fail to recognize the signs of widespread prescription drug abuse, doctors and drug experts said Tuesday at a forum to look at ways to solve the rising tide of overdose deaths and abuse.

Well-meaning doctors are fooled by addicts posing as patients. Parents are lulled into believing that their prescriptions are safe from their children and their friends. Even addicts themselves don't realize the strength and danger of the drugs they depend on.

"They're making doctors unwilling participants in the drug trade," said panelist Dr. Rafael Miguel, a professor of anesthesiology and neurosurgery at the University of South Florida, at the forum, which was sponsored by the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Florida has failed to monitor and track prescription drugs the way most other states have, making it easy for addicts and dealers to get multiple prescriptions from different doctors, Miguel said, winning applause from an audience of about 50 people.

"We don't have a pain-o-meter where you can put a finger in and say, she's having that amount of pain. ... We can easily be fooled. (A patient) can be doing the same thing to 10 other physicians."

Doctors such as Miguel take elaborate measures, including random drug tests and counseling, to make sure their patients have real injuries and aren't abusing prescriptions. But audience members said some doctors and drug companies are part of the problem.

"Our kids are hit from a very young age" with drug company ads, said Cindy Harney, whose 20-year-old son Garrett died in 2006 after overdosing. "They think a pill will solve everything."

Harney, who traveled from Sarasota to attend the forum, told other audience members that powerful drugs are prescribed too readily. "How many patients need pain (medicine) that is meant for dying cancer patients?" she asked.

Prescription drugs are becoming more deadly. In 2006, prescription drug overdoses killed 1,720 people in Florida, up about 40 percent in three years. Prescription painkillers and anti-anxiety drugs now kill about 500 people in the Tampa Bay area each year. That's three times as many as the number killed by illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin.

Panelist Bonnie Blake, a psychiatric nurse at Morton Plant Hospital whose stepson died of an overdose, said parents need to take precautions. Lock up your medicines, she said.

The Times sponsored the forum after publishing a series on the problem last month.
