

Efforts to track drugs are stuck

By By Chris Tisch, Times staff writer

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There is a bill in the state Legislature this year that would save more lives than any other proposal currently before lawmakers, Dr. Rafael Miguel says.

It calls for the creation of a statewide database to alert physicians or pharmacists of people trying to dupe them into giving out drugs.

Deaths from prescription drug overdoses have soared in Florida to nearly 2,000 per year — about a quarter of those in the Tampa Bay area. Police say doctor shoppers and drug dealers increasingly are using doctors to get drugs, which they sell on the black market.

A monitoring program would be an effective tool in helping combat the problem, say doctors, pharmacists and law enforcement officials.

"We need to get this epidemic under control," said Miguel, a University of South Florida anesthesiology and pain medicine professor who has championed the database for years.

But bills in both the Florida House and Senate have stalled and appear in peril of dying in committee. And with the session nearly half over, the chances of passage are dimming by the day.

Rep. Jack Seiler, D-Fort Lauderdale, the sponsor of the House bill, says he thinks the chances of the bills becoming law are only 50-50 — and that seems optimistic.

"I guess they're going to wait until we lose a few more thousand lives until it becomes important to them," said Julie Rinaldi, whose 17-year-old daughter, Sarah, died of a prescription drug overdose in Tampa in 2006.

Rinaldi said the oxycodone her daughter overdosed on came from a physician who prescribed them to a doctor shopper.

"I think getting rid of the doctor shoppers will get a lot of these pills off the street," said Rinaldi, who belongs to Parents Against Prescription Drug Addiction. The group has been e-mailing and calling lawmakers to try to get the bill moving.

Said Seiler: "I've gotten a huge number of e-mails from parents and sisters and brothers all talking about this issue and what we can do to help. It is a crisis."

Earlier bill failed

Similar bills have been introduced for the past five years. Though the Senate has passed them, they have failed in the House.

Opponents believe it is either too expensive or that it puts too much private information about patients in the hands of the government.

The program will cost as much as \$4-million, which Seiler admits could be an impediment given this year's budget crisis.

But Florida drug czar Bill Janes said lawmakers don't have to approve more money for the database. Janes said he will find the money somewhere — perhaps through federal grants.

Opponents also say the database smacks of big brother. Supporters argue that insurance companies have this information already. Though insurance companies often alert doctors if a patient is getting drugs from other physicians, doctor shoppers can circumvent that by paying cash.

The database would record all prescriptions received by patients in Florida, allowing doctors and pharmacists to check on whether a patient already has been prescribed drugs by another doctor.

Law enforcement also could use the database, though only for an active investigation.

Thirty-five other states have such databases. Law enforcement officials say they have heard of prescription drug addicts and dealers leaving those states to come here because drugs are so much easier to get.

The bills have been endorsed by the Florida Medical Association and other doctor groups.

A broad plan

Seiler's initial bill only gave access to law enforcement. Seiler said he thought that bill might face the least resistance. But he has since filed an amendment that will give access to doctors and pharmacists.

"We need the controls at the candy store," Miguel said.

Seiler said he's hearing there is some resistance to his bill because while patient information would not be accessible to the public, the prescribing patterns of doctors would be.

"Some of the providers want to have their records exempt," Seiler said.

Seiler's bill currently is sitting in the Committee on Health Quality, but has not been put on the agenda.

That committee is chaired by Rep. Gayle Harrell, who has sponsored the database bill in past years.

"I'm very much ready to move it on," Harrell said Friday. "We're now at the fourth week of session. We're starting to run out of time."

In the Senate, the database bill has a powerful sponsor in Sen. Jeff Atwater, who is in line to be Senate president.

The bill was referred to four Senate committees, including Health Regulation, which Atwater chairs. But Atwater, who didn't return calls seeking comment, hasn't put the bill on the agenda yet.

Harrell said she believes Atwater is waiting to see if the House will get its bill moving first.

"The opposition to the bill has been well known across the board because of the misunderstanding of the privacy concerns," Harrell said. "I am not optimistic."

Chris Tisch can be reached at (727) 892-2359 or tisch@sptimes.com.