

April 10, 2008

## Our Opinion: Abuse prevention

### Prescription drugs need more oversight

Death tolls from heroin and cocaine are on the decline, which is good, but deaths from prescription-controlled substances sold as OxyContin and Vicodin among other drugs are going up, and Florida is at the heart of the problem.

While our state ranks low among the other 49 in many embarrassing arenas, Florida accounts for 11 percent of the dollars spent worldwide on OxyContin — largely because it's so easy to get here. People come from far and wide to get prescription-controlled drugs, including others such as Percocet, Percodan and Valium, for nonmedicinal purposes.

The Florida Society of Anesthesiologists is trying to change that, seeking legislation already in effect in 36 states. It would quite simply establish Web-based record-keeping accessible only to doctors and pharmacists — and law enforcement if criminal activity is suspected.

Right now, a patient can rather easily get several doctors to write legal prescriptions for painkillers or tranquilizers and take the prescriptions to several pharmacies to have them filled. None of the doctors or the pharmacies may have any indication that other doctors or pharmacies have already supplied these potentially dangerous and/or addictive medications.

These substances are obviously dangerous, even deadly, when abused. But they're also dangerous when no larceny is involved.

Dr. Rafael Miguel, who practices medicine in Sarasota and in Tampa at the University of South Florida, is immediate past president of the Florida Society of Anesthesiologists. He says countless patients, especially older ones, run into trouble with drug interactions that are damaging or deadly. They get one drug from one physician who isn't aware they're taking another medication from a specialist in another area — a prescription drug that cannot be tolerated with medications prescribed by the first doctor.

Lawmakers should adopt as Florida law Senate Bill 1550, sponsored by Sen. Burt Saunders, R-Naples, which would address, electronically, those safety concerns. And it would also attack "doctor shopping" that leads to abuse and death.

The Tallahassee area experiences about three deaths a month in which drugs have been found at lethal levels, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Statewide, the figure is 12 drug-related deaths a day, of which 69 percent involved prescription drugs and, of those, 76 percent were lethal levels, according to the Board of Medical Examiners. The National Institutes of Drug Abuse report that 1 in 9 high-school seniors have used Vicodin recreationally.

"This is an abomination," said Dr. Miguel. "Florida is an embarrassment in this day and age when encryption is so sophisticated" that it renders absurd the argument by opponents that medical databases have overtones of "Big Brother." Unauthorized access would be a felony under this legislation.

In fact, if your drugs are paid for by Medicaid, these cross-checking databases are already in effect. Most managed-care systems are scrupulous about keeping such records, because it is cost-effective as well as prudent health care. The cost of expanding medical databases would be, Dr. Miguel said, negligible, and the bill could be passed without any state money involved.

"This should not be a political issue," he said. For several years it has been, but he is quite right. In a difficult year for problem-solving, passage of SB 1550 would attack a large one. Expanding the database to include everyone receiving controlled substances would save lives.

---