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## Lenient Climate For Painkillers Adds To Florida's Heartache

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If you're middle-aged, you're more likely to be accidentally killed or injured by prescription drugs than by a car crash. If you're in high school, one in 10 of your classmates has abused powerful pain medication.

Medical examiners report that overdoses of prescription drugs are killing more than 2,000 people in Florida each year.

It's possible in Florida to visit several doctors and get multiple prescriptions for the same or similar drug. Drug dealers can do the same, which explains how so many powerful pain pills wind up in the hands of folks not under a doctor's care.

Thirty-five states have enacted drug-monitoring laws to expose abuses and make it harder to profit from dangerous addictions. But the Florida Legislature again this year decided to do nothing, which makes the state an increasingly attractive place to collect pills.

A monitoring bill co-sponsored by Rep. Bill Heller, a Pinellas Democrat, died in the recent legislative session without ever coming to a vote. Fellow lawmakers, he said, spoke favorably of the plan for pharmacies to report sales of certain dangerous drugs to the state Department of Health. The idea got nowhere, Heller said, because it would have been a new expense in a budget sharply reduced from last year.

But doing nothing costs the public much more. The Drug Abuse Warning Network reports that since 1995, the number of drug abuse-related emergency room visits involving pain relievers increased nationwide by 153 percent.

Those visits represent thousands of families on the brink of disaster. Pharmacist Larry Golbom, host of The Prescription Addiction Radio show, says: "The introduction of OxyContin in 1995 has increased deaths and addictions from a legal drug not seen since the introduction of heroin as a 'safe' alternative to morphine over 100 years ago."

An interesting insight into the depth of the problem comes from a medical clinic in Columbus, Ohio. It decided to tighten its policy on prescribing pain medication and the results were sobering. More than a third of its patients showed evidence of drug abuse. Urine tests found cocaine and heroin in some, while others were taking prescription narcotics the doctors didn't know about. Still others asking for refills of their pain medicine had no prescription drugs in their system at all, indicating they had sold their previous prescription.

A doctor told the National Review of Medicine why many patients ask for pain pills they themselves don't need: "It's very lucrative. Oxycodone and hydromorphone go for a dollar per milligram."


Lax oversight in Florida is allowing widespread abuse to continue. A doctor can't know for sure how many prescriptions a patient has gotten elsewhere, and unscrupulous doctors, pharmacies and clinics are hard to identify.

In recent testimony to Congress, Len Paulozzi, an epidemiologist with the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, said that accidental drug overdoses are second only to motor vehicle crashes as the leading cause of unintentional injury and death, and that for people aged 45 to 54, drug accidents are the leading killer.

The Florida Legislature should find a way to create a secure database of who is buying narcotics in what quantities and from whom. The cost of not knowing is unacceptably high.

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