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Top drugs on street now Rx

By **MATT COLEMAN**,
The Times-Union

Jacksonville pharmacist Denise Stiles-Yount's daily routine usually consists of filling prescriptions and chatting with customers.

Until June 10, when an armed robber burst into her Atlantic Boulevard pharmacy and stole about \$500 worth of the powerful narcotic OxyContin.

Stiles-Yount became one of the victims in the emerging illegal prescription drug trade. Law enforcement and drug control officials have seen prescriptions transition from medicine-cabinet fixtures to street regulars in the past five years, supplanting cocaine and heroin in street dealers' inventories.

A study released Thursday by the Florida Medical Examiners Commission also found prescription drugs contributed to three times as many deaths statewide last year as illicit drugs, and Jacksonville is among the state's leaders in cases involving some of the top killers - hydrocodone, oxycodone and methadone.

Tricks of the drug trade

Prescription drugs aren't flooding the streets because of curious kids raiding the medicine cabinet.

Dominick Pape, Florida Department of Law Enforcement special agent in charge for Jacksonville, said intricate operations have sprung up to capitalize on the demand for legal drugs and they use illegal angles to score more product.

The most traditional scam is doctor shopping, in which people go from doctor to doctor trying to get a prescription for a specific drug. The prescription can be written for a legitimate diagnosis or because of physician negligence, but the result is an excess of pills for the patient to sell or use.

Doctors also need to keep a close eye on their prescription pads. Pape said his agency often deals with pads that have been stolen and used to write false prescriptions.

Other approaches are more direct. Pape's agency has tracked a startling upswing in smash-and-grab burglaries and strong-arm robberies of pharmacies.

Stiles-Yount knows that first-hand. She has been a pharmacist for 25 years. She's been held up twice in the past two.

"This is out of control," she said. "There's a whole new type of junkie out there that wants these drugs, and they're carrying guns."

From 'scripts to street

The contraband has been making its way in increasing numbers to street-level dealers.

Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Division Chief John Hartley followed the flow of prescription drugs in the First Coast for a decade as a narcotics unit supervisor.

He estimated upward of 70 percent of all illegal drugs sold in Jacksonville are prescriptions.

That's why, he said, dealers are changing their selection. Instead of slinging nothing but crack rocks and eight balls, street doctors are carrying a veritable pharmacy's worth of goods.

Undercover officers broke up a prescription drug operation March 28 that was run out of a Lenox Avenue junkyard. Hartley said about 15 people were waiting in line to buy OxyContin before police raided the area and arrested three dealers.

But he said many still underrate the size of the illegal prescription market.

Hartley said the ubiquitous nature and legal status of prescriptions makes them harder to fight than cocaine or heroin.

"You might know someone who takes Xanax or a few too many pills," Hartley said. "How can you tell they don't have a prescription? It's not like they're shooting up in front of you."

The trend isn't isolated to hardened criminals with milelong arrest records.

Hartley encountered the same drugs on a daily basis, but the people who used them were dynamic.

"You can't narrow this down to the crackhead on the street corner. There are businessmen and professionals using," he said.

"Prescription drug abuse reaches across society," he said. "It can get to anybody."

Closing the floodgates

Bill Janes, director of the Florida Office of Drug Control, said arresting users is a micro-level remedy to a widespread problem. He believes more emphasis needs to be placed on shutting down Internet dealers, and doctors and pharmacies need to keep a watchful eye on repeat offenders.

He said a state database system capable of tracking the sale of prescription drugs would be helpful. The database, in use by 33 states, would give police and pharmacies access to consolidated records on patients and prescribers, allowing them to determine the legality of a prescription.

Janes said the Legislature voted down the database because of patient privacy concerns.

Stiles-Yount said the database would set up roadblocks for people seeking illegal prescription drugs.

"We absolutely need this system," Stiles-Yount said. "It's a whole new ballgame out there and we need to adapt."

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