

Tragic for people to continue to die due to prescription-drug abuse

Time to solve situation.

By TCPalm Staff

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The numbers tell (almost) the whole story:

Three times as many Floridians died in 2007 from the abuse/misuse of prescription pain medications than from illegal drugs, according to figures released recently by the Florida Medical Examiners Commission. Moreover, between 2000 and today, the number of deaths related to prescription-drug abuse has more than tripled.

The problem is likely to get worse until Florida lawmakers take an important, long-overdue step and create a statewide prescription-drug monitoring database. Here's why:

- The absence of a statewide monitoring database has caused prescription-drug abuse in Florida to explode. There is a direct correlation between increasing numbers of prescription-drug deaths and the lack of enforcement.

"There's a significant disconnect between doctors and pharmacies," said Dr. Rafael Miguel, a former member of the state Board of Medicine and current director of pain medicine for neurosurgery at the University of South Florida in Tampa. "Patients who may be abusing, and drug dealers, will target different doctors and pharmacies. They can do this in Florida without virtually any chance of getting caught."

- People from outside the state are now coming to Florida, in increasing numbers, to exploit the system.

Says Miguel: "What we've seen in recent years, with other database programs being enacted in other states, are drug abusers and drug dealers coming into our state, with impunity, and leaving doctors' offices with prescriptions for controlled substances."

The solution? **The creation of a statewide computer database.** Once the system has been put into place, the purchase of every potentially lethal prescription drug would be logged into the program, thereby giving doctors, pharmacists and law enforcement officers a critical tool to help them spot abusers. Access to the online site would be limited to Florida's licensed physicians and pharmacists, and local and state law enforcement officers empowered by a court order to investigate abuses.

Previous efforts in the state Legislature to create a database have failed — ostensibly because of concerns for "privacy rights." However, as Miguel observes: "The Medicaid program in Florida has used a secure online database for several years — the same kind of system we'd like lawmakers to approve. Security has never been an issue with the Medicaid program, and it won't be a cause for concern with the prescription-drug database, either."

The Florida Medical Association and a wide array of other medical and professional organizations will attempt to persuade the 2009 Legislature to implement this much-needed tool.

There's another number Floridians should ponder: 7. This is the years in a row Florida lawmakers have rejected bills that would have created a prescription-drug monitoring database.

If lawmakers truly care, the eighth time will be the charm.

BY THE NUMBERS

6-7 Average daily deaths in Florida caused by the abuse/misuse of prescription drugs.

38 States that employ a prescription-drug monitoring database to track sales. (Florida isn't one of them.)

989 Deaths caused by illegal drugs, such as heroin and cocaine.

2,328 Deaths caused by prescription pain medications, such as Methadone, OxyContin and Vicodin.

700,000 Floridians illegally abusing/misusing prescription drugs.

Florida Medical Association