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New wave of drug deaths hits Southwest Florida

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Patrick Mullins held his best friend's body in his arms, watching his face turn blue.

That memory is fresh on Mullins' mind. The 24-year-old remembers that night three years ago when he drove to his best friend's apartment high on prescription drugs, realizing his friend had overdosed on methadone and was probably dead.

"I wanted to prove to myself he wasn't," said Mullins, who is now in recovery at Southwest Florida Addiction Services' Transitional Living Center.

Unfortunately, he was.

Prescription drugs originally designed to ease the pain of those with cancer and depression have made their way into the lives of people looking to get high.

Now, those drugs, including oxycodone, Xanax and methodone, are causing more deaths in Florida than drugs with a more deadly reputation, drugs such as heroin and cocaine.

In 2007, prescription drugs accounted for 69 percent of all drug-related deaths, excluding alcohol, according to an annual report by Florida medical examiners. Prescription drugs were linked to at least 120 of Lee County's 300 drug-related deaths in 2007, the Lee County medical examiner reported.

As of June, drugs were linked to 203 deaths in Lee County. It is unclear how many of those deaths involved prescription drugs.

When it comes to solving the problem, the medical community and law enforcement agree that getting out the truth about the harm prescription drugs can do is a key step.

"It needs a stigma attached to it, and we need to tell people what to look for," said Sgt. Mark Shelly, who works in the Lee County Sheriff's Office Pharmaceutical Investigations Law enforcement Strategy, unit, which targets illegal prescription drugs.

Shelly first started seeing oxycodone, commonly referred to by its brand name Roxycodone, and other prescription drugs about six months to a year ago.

Now, oxycodone, sometimes called roxys or blues, can be as common as cocaine, he said. The PILS unit has seized 5,800 pills and has made 200 arrests so far in 2008.

"The most illicit drug dealers are selling this as well," Shelly said.

One reason for the appearance of prescription drugs on the street, Mullins said, is users know the drug is pure and more effective than drugs such as cocaine that can be weakened with other substances, including bleach.

Also, the pills are easy to get a hold of because many of them are found in medicine cabinets, said Mullins, who first tried prescription drugs while in middle school when a classmate brought in a prescription for OxyContin for one of his parents.

"He was emptying handfuls out for a couple of bucks," Mullins said.

More and more people addicted to prescription drugs have made their way to the detox center run by Southwest Florida Addiction Services.

Dr. Washington Baquero, medical director of the center, has watched as his patients go from mostly cocaine users to those addicted to oxycodone.

"It is a big problem," Baquero said. "It's moving along through addict communities."

The median age of a person addicted to prescription drugs who comes to the detox center is mid-20s, Baquero said, and most still become addicted first from a doctor's prescription.

"If you can control this on time, you won't have as many young people addicted," he said.

It might start as a drug one can only get from prescriptions, but Craig Guiliano, who is in recovery for a Roxycodone addiction, said a person could get the drug at almost any bar or club.

Guiliano, 23, first tried Roxycodone shortly after he moved to Cape Coral from New Jersey two years ago. At first, he used the drug occasionally on weekend nights with friends, crushing up the blue pill and snorting it.

But soon his occasional use turned to a daily occurrence as he secretly got high several times a day.

"I wouldn't want anyone to know," said Guiliano, who has now been clean for two months.

Guiliano has watched his best friend die from an overdose and another friend commit suicide because he couldn't kick his addiction to prescription pills.

But Guiliano sees no end to the abuse of prescription drugs, especially because of their availability.

"It's a wave that's out there now," he said.
