

**OUTSIDE THE BOX**

## What about drive-in movies and going steady?

### Commentary: College-bound kids pack new item -- chemical dependency

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*(Editor's note: Dr. Howard Kornfeld runs a community-based medical practice in Mill Valley, Calif., specializing in pain and addiction medicine. Jerry Bayer is his director of patient services.)*

**SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- Not so long ago, although lately it's starting to feel like a very long time ago, graduating from high school was a sweet moment indeed. Last minute glitches over a missing half credit of gym were successfully navigated. College Board exams taken, colleges of interest visited, college applications completed, and then came the interminable wait for the mail to arrive. It finally ended when you found out where you had been admitted, and where it was a no-go. Only then came the ultimate sigh of relief and a last summer of youthful fun shared with high school friends. This is what the summer between high school and college was meant to be.**

Not so anymore. A growing number of high school graduates, possibly yours, find their way to our medical practice in Mill Valley, Calif., every summer. This is the time when they and their families finally have to confront the 800-pound gorilla that has entered their lives. This "monkey on their back" is a growing dependency on, or addiction to, an escalating and dangerous daily dose of opiate pain pills, such as Vicodin or OxyContin.

This is the not-so-quietly kept secret in the world of addiction medicine and treatment of it is steadily becoming a larger aspect of our local practice. Now it becomes clear where all those Vicodin disappeared to. Think about the pills that have been sitting quietly in the medicine cabinet for the past five years, waiting for you to pull a muscle after a middle-aged basketball game.

The bottle that never bothered anyone until your son or daughter casually mentioned, "You know those pills you had sitting in the medicine cabinet, Dad. I'm not sure what they were, but I accidentally knocked them over and they went down the bathroom sink". And you said, "No problem, I wasn't using them anyway." As if they didn't know that already.

The federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) tells us that in 2005, the most recent year for which we have complete data, more than two million teens abused prescription drugs. The same agency tells us that more than one-third of all new abusers of prescription drugs were between 12-years-old and 17-years-old. And among 12-year-olds to 13-year-olds, prescription drugs were the most commonly abused drugs of all. That's right, the most. Not alcohol; not marijuana; not cocaine; just plain old prescription medicine from the bathroom cabinet.

SAMHSA also tells us that nearly half (47%) of teens who used prescription drugs say they got them free or from a relative or friend. When you sit home at night and watch commercial after commercial from the pharmaceutical companies hawking this and that, did you think your kids weren't catching the message?

The message communicated time after time is that pills make you feel better, and they are invariably presented as being "almost completely" safe. So why not take them? Plus, and this is a very big plus, they're just sitting there in the family medicine cabinet waiting to be taken.

We've seen in the last few years an increasing number of parents and teens coming to our office in late August tell us of a severe addiction and asking us to "fix them up" so they can begin their college careers on schedule. Of course, we must often tell them that no "quick fix" exists, and that if they had come in just two or three weeks earlier we may have been able to at least get them started on a detox program that might have made the fall quarter salvageable.

We need to talk to our children about the why these medications are used and the dangers they pose if taken for the wrong reasons. And of course, we need to make sure they aren't left around in the first place, so our children can take a couple just to see how it feels.

Don't second guess yourself or doubt your reservations, these are our children. Let your intuition be your guide. Be skeptical. Get professional help. Time is of the essence.

The faster that parents can find out what's actually going on, the better chance we have of successfully detoxifying and stabilizing these teens. Success in embarking on their new earned independence and starting productive college careers and adult lives may very well hang in the balance. ■

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