

Drug overdoses in Fla. targeted

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CLEARWATER — Fatal prescription drug overdoses in Florida jumped more than 20 percent last year. More than 3,000 cases were reported — painkiller addicts, kids stealing Valium from their parents' medicine cabinets, alcoholics who mix booze with Xanax.

About 150 people gathered at St. Petersburg College on Tuesday to promote one possible solution: a statewide registry that would track every prescription. Forgeries by drug dealers and addicts would be flagged. Doctors who hand out painkillers like candy would be exposed.

Thirty-six states have such registries and the Legislature should make Florida No. 37, said Hillsborough County commissioner Rose Ferlita, who also is a pharmacist.

"We cannot allow Florida to lag behind when it comes to the safety of our citizens," she said.

Previous bills seeking to create just such a registry have failed three times, with some lawmakers worried about excessive governmental intrusion in private health matters.

"But I think we are going to do it this year," said William Janes, director of the governor's office of drug control.

Health care trade groups are backing the effort, he said, as are many law enforcement officials. Either grant money or private contributions could fund registry operations, which have cost up to \$1-million a year in other states.

Deaths from prescription drugs now outnumber deaths from illicit drugs like cocaine and heroin by a 3-to-1 margin.

"I am getting calls all the time now," Janes said. "What are we doing? Why hasn't this passed? Families are outraged."

Janes and the drug control office called Tuesday's meeting to organize grass roots lobbying support.

Doctors, pharmacists, law enforcement and community advocates showed up to kick around strategies. They often used the word "epidemic" to describe what they are seeing.

"We are going to be walking the halls of Tallahassee," said Largo police Chief Lester Aradi. "We are seeing a marked increase in robberies of pharmacies of oxycodone, and I expect those robberies to go up."

Mark Serra of Clearwater wants legislators to know about his son, Matthew, who overdosed at age 28, and others like him.

Matthew took painkillers after injuring his back and fed an addiction for years by doctor-shopping.

"To an average person, a drug addict is somebody who sneaks into a corner and shoots up or goes into an alleyway and makes a drug buy," Serra said. "But this is more of an upscale thing."

Laurie Serra believes a prescription registry might have saved her stepson by exposing his problem before it progressed too far.

"How many lives could have been saved if we had passed this years ago?" she said. "There is always going to be drug abuse. But we as a society are making it way too easy."

Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, has introduced a registry bill that would allow doctors and pharmacists to view a patient's history before writing or filling a prescription. A warning would go up if the patient has recently sought similar drugs from other doctors and pharmacies.

In extreme cases, prosecutors could go after law breakers.

The bill's language is preliminary and may be adjusted to mesh with other registry ideas, Fasano said.

"This time, I believe we have good chance of passing it," he said. "The president of the Senate asked me to do the bill. The Florida Medical Association has made it a top priority and the Florida Sheriff's Association has made it a top priority.

"We have a crisis in this state that needs to be addressed."

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By the numbers

3,154 Fatal overdoses on prescription drugs in Florida in 2007

2,566 Fatal overdoses on prescription drugs in Florida in 2006

989 Fatal overdoses on illegal drugs in Florida in 2007

947 Fatal overdoses on illegal drugs in Florida in 2006

(Some deaths are double-counted when a person dies from lethal levels of multiple drugs)

Source: Florida Department of Law Enforcement