

# Abuse of painkillers raises alerts in Tier, U.S.

## *Addiction cuts across demographic boundaries*

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Julie Steiner took the prescription painkiller Vicodin for her migraines.

After a year, she was popping up to 20 pills a day to feed a habit that began to take her life apart in the mid-1990s.

Steiner, a homemaker in her 30s and a mother who'd never in her life used an illegal street drug, began to shop for doctors to get the pills. The sense of euphoria and well-being offered by the drug was a hard habit to break.

Steiner even sent her friends to doctors to get Vicodin prescriptions they'd pass on to her, she said.

"You become a great liar," said Steiner, a former Candor resident. "You lie and get whatever you need."

Others in the Southern Tier have recently killed, robbed or risked professional careers to get their hands on prescription painkillers, investigators said.

In fact, the epidemic of prescription painkiller abuse nationwide has prompted federal drug agencies to air public campaigns warning of addiction to controlled substances like Vicodin and its more powerful painkilling cousin, Oxycontin.

### **It's serious stuff**

State police say a dispute over prescription painkillers was the catalyst for a fatal shooting Jan. 20 at a Town of Windsor residence that left a woman dead and two men with gunshot wounds.

According to investigators, 21-year-old Anthony J. Carnevale shot and killed Jean R. Clark of Parsons, Pa., and shot and wounded his cousin, Ethan Button, in Button's house. The reason, police say, was because Carnevale wanted Button's Vicodin.

Carnevale, who was himself critically injured when Button shot him, is facing a second-degree murder charge. So is his wife, 20-year-old Ashley Carnevale, who drove away from the scene.

### **Painkillers on the rise**

Local narcotics investigators began noticing an increase in the number of prescription pain-killers on the street about five years ago.

Yet, the real market for such drugs goes on in secret inside people's homes and medicine cabinets, said state police Lt. Patrick Garey, who heads the Southern Tier's Community Narcotics Enforcement Team.

It's not common for Garey's people to see prescription painkillers when they make local drug busts, the trooper said. Street drugs like marijuana, cocaine, crack, methamphetamine and heroin are much more common.

As far as Garey knows, there are no big organized crime syndicates dealing in prescription painkillers because they are carefully controlled through prescriptions.

"It's more difficult for a street drug dealer to get a regular supply of that type of drug," Garey said.

When the drugs do hit the streets, however, they can bring in big money.

A single pill of Oxycontin is worth up to \$30 in the Southern Tier, Garey said. Methadone, a prescription drug used by heroin addicts to break their addiction, commands \$20 a pill.

Vicodin falls near the bottom of the price list at \$2 to \$5 a pill, Garey said.

Robbers were after both oxycontin and Vicodin when they robbed a Binghamton pharmacy at gunpoint and knifepoint on Nov. 5, city police said. Bingham-ton detectives arrested Richard M. Griffin, 22, of Syracuse on Jan. 2, saying he was one of two men who staged the daring mid-afternoon robbery at the Clintwood Pharmacy in the city's First Ward. A second man, Robert A. Turcotte, 23, of Hillcrest, was arrested about a week later.

The two wore ski masks, carried weapons and ordered a clerk to the floor while they leaped over the counter and took prescription painkillers, detectives said.

It wasn't the first time the pharmacy had been robbed at gunpoint for painkillers. In April 2007, a robber staged a similar crime, records show.

## Off the shelves

Such violence in quest of the drugs spurred the owner of The Pharmacy in Johnson City to **discontinue keeping Oxycontin on his shelves two years ago.**

Now, patients with prescriptions for the potent painkiller get their medication on a next-day basis, said Larry Bailey, pharmacist and owner of The Pharmacy on Main Street in the Town of Union's Westover hamlet.

"It's a liability to keep on the shelf," Bailey said of Oxycontin. "This way, we can meet people's needs and make it safer for all of us."

Bailey said prescription painkillers used properly have helped people manage their pain. **Oxycontin** is most commonly prescribed for the serious pain suffered by cancer patients and people with chronic pain from injuries. The milder **Vicodin** is more often seen prescribed to control pain from surgery, fractures and tooth extraction, the pharmacist said.

**Both medications are members of the large, potentially addictive opiate family, he said.**

Like Garey, Bailey has seen an increase in the illicit ways people obtain the strictly monitored drugs. At least once a day, a customer tries to get a Vicodin prescription refilled too soon. Bailey also sees up to 15 attempts a year to alter prescriptions.

Bailey and other pharmacists have always been on the front lines in the fight against painkiller abuse. But he said the battle is time-consuming and constant. Suspected abusers are reported to the Bureau of Narcotics Control at the state Health Department where Bailey said he's on a first-name basis with investigators.

"When the state narcotics investigators come around, we need to be able to answer them," Bailey said.

State investigators obtained help from pharmacists in Endicott and Vestal, who aided in the charging of a dentist who police said was writing prescriptions for Vicodin for himself in the names of family members.

Dr. Thomas J. Lucia, a 46-year-old Endicott dentist, pleaded innocent Dec. 15 to one felony count each of fourth- and fifth-degree criminal possession of a controlled substance in Endicott Village Court.

## **Addiction**

The drug holds an allure for all kinds of people.

"Addiction happens to anybody," Julie Steiner said. "Rich and poor."

Her moment of truth came after she had a seizure while dropping off her child at a bowling alley.

It took a two-day stay in the hospital and two weeks in rehab for Steiner to detoxify from the drug. The feelings of body aches were intense, but she'd suffered them each time she emptied a container of Vicodin.

One relapse and a threat from her husband Steve to get the police involved finally made Steiner get clean, she said.

"I was sick of being sick," she says. "It was too much."

Now, she takes over-the-counter medication for her headaches.

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