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[DRUG-RELATED DEATHS]

Drug-Related Deaths: Legal Drugs Are Problem Too

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Despite pleas from tearful mothers who lost their children to overdoses, concerned pharmacists and ethical experts in pain management, the Florida Legislature refused again last year to authorize a system to monitor the prescription of high-powered and addictive drugs.

One result of that failure was not surprising: Drug-related deaths rose again, as they have over the past six years, according to the latest available figures.

The number of drug-related deaths in Florida rose to 4,055 from January to June 2008, compared to 3,980 during the first six months of 2007. (The Medical Examiners Commission collects cause-of-death data. These numbers are from the most recent report.)

The latest summary report by the examiners reaches many of the same conclusions contained in the previous year's report. The three "most frequently occurring" drugs present in decedents were alcohol, in 1,923 deaths; benzodiazepines (tranquilizers such as Xanax and Valium), 1,469; and cocaine, 955.

Of the three, only cocaine is illegal. To grasp the link between prescription drugs and deaths, consider this: According to the report, "the drugs that caused the most deaths were" Oxycodone, a narcotic pain killer sold as OxyContin, and contained in Percocet and Percodan (423 deaths); benzodiazepines, (392 deaths); cocaine (360); methadone, a pain killer that is also used in heroin-detoxification programs (324 deaths); alcohol, (207 deaths); morphine, an opiate-based pain killer known as MS-Contin in tablet form and Roxanol in liquid form, (129 deaths); hydrocodone, a narcotic pain killer included in Vicodin and Lortab, (126 deaths).

"The prescription drugs ... tracked through this report continued to be found more often than illicit drugs" in decedents in both lethal and nonlethal levels, the medical examiners stated.

That fact alone demonstrates that Florida needs to focus on prescription-drug abuse and the inadequate regulation of drugs labeled as controlled substances. NATIONAL EMBARRASSMENT Cindy Harney of Sarasota founded Families Against Addictive Drug Abuse after her son died from an overdose of prescription drugs. The group has campaigned courageously and tirelessly to raise awareness about the problems associated with easy availability of drugs through clinics known as pill mills, fraudulent prescriptions and the black market.

Dr. Rafael Miguel, the director of the pain-medicine program at the University of South Florida, has lobbied long and hard for the Legislature to create an electronic, privacy-protected database

that would give health-care practitioners, pharmacies and pharmacists access to patient-medication histories. The database would allow ethical prescribers and pharmacists to detect excessive numbers of prescriptions, indicative of either drug abuse or illegal resales.

Dr. Miguel, who practices at a Sarasota Memorial Health Care System clinic and is certified by the American Board of Anesthesiology, also supports requiring free-standing pain clinics to be operated by a board-certified pain-management physician.

Stories across Florida make clear that some doctors and clinics overprescribe, and that many patients shop for doctors and clinics until they find the drugs they want to take or sell.

Thirty-eight states have some form of system that enables health-care professionals to monitor and flag prescriptions for narcotics and potentially addictive drugs. Lacking such a system, Florida is, Dr. Miguel says, "a national embarrassment." PRESCRIPTION-DRUG VALIDATION Fortunately, pending legislation - the committee substitute for Senate Bill 462 - would authorize the state Department of Health to create an electronic prescription drug-validation-program intended to provide the monitoring and protections necessary. The bill offers appropriate protections for patient security, targets only the high-power pain killers and sedatives, and clearly states that the legislation should not interfere with "legitimate prescribing" of controlled substances.

The Florida Medical Association supports this bill, as do concerned doctors and pharmacists, and survivors of the victims of drug-related overdoses. It won't end prescription-drug abuse but it will help keep the problem from worsening.

The technology and the need to create this database exist. Now it's time for the Legislature to express the political will to approve it - before the passing of another year of rising drug-related deaths.

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