

"It's an epidemic"

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April 18, 2009 - 5:22PM

Almost every time local investigators arrive at the scene of an overdose, they find the same things.

Ground up pills on a plate, ready to snort.

Spoons with black burn marks on one side and white residue on the other.

A dead man or woman who went out to the edge and then took one more step.

About twice a month, sometimes more often, Bay County Sheriff's officials respond to a home where someone has overdosed on Oxycontin, Oxycodone, Dilaudid or some combination of pain pills and alcohol, investigators said.

The trend began in early 2008 and has not abated.

"It's an epidemic," said Capt. Rickie Ramie.

The Sheriff's Office is now seeing more drug cases involving prescription pills than meth, cocaine and marijuana cases combined, he said.

Often the people caught up in this addiction do not know what they are doing, and by the time they realize where the road is headed, it is too late, investigators said.

"Your kid is not a criminal. He's not a bad person," Lt. Faith Bell often tells parents. "They have just got a hold of something that they can't control."

'It doesn't have a face'

Those addicted to prescription pills are different from people addicted to meth or other drugs, officials said. For one thing, when an investigator leaves a card on their door, they will return the call.

"You think I could do that with a pot dealer?" Bell asked.

They always return the call, Bell said, and then she sits them down and administers tough love.

"You have a pill problem," Bell tells the person. "I want to help you."

At that point, a lot of addicts will break down and start crying, Bell added.

For some, the problem started with a prescription from a doctor for a real medical issue and then grew into something more.

"These people think they are not doing anything illegal," Ramie said.

But prescription drug addicts often end up shopping for doctors and pharmacies that will fill prescriptions for hundreds of pills at high doses. The best cases involve a trip to rehab with days or sometimes weeks of withdrawal. The worst cases end in death, Ramie said.

"You can't gauge at what point it is lethal," he added.

Nor can you tell who is an addict and who isn't by looking at them.

"It doesn't have a face," said Rick McClung, the minister of evangelism and community outreach at First Baptist Church.

People addicted to crack or meth wreck their lives and their health in a matter of months, said McClung, who is the director of The Most Excellent Way, a support group for people addicted to drugs and alcohol.

In a lot of cases, those addicted to pills can maintain a "professional" level job for years, maybe even a decade, until something bad happens, McClung said.

"These are people you would not suspect," Bell said. "These are people you know."

The trigger can be the loss of a job or a spouse who has had enough or a medical problem, he added. But sooner or later the habit takes over, McClung said.

"I belong to the habit. The habit no longer belongs to me," McClung said.

Out of control

According to the United Way of Broward County, Broward leads the nation in the amount of Oxycodone dispensed directly by physicians. From January until June 2008, doctors prescribed 3,383,200 pills of Oxycodone. Doctors in Palm Beach prescribed 852,800 pills while Miami-Dade doctors prescribed 393,900 doses of the powerful pain reliever.

The South Florida media and local addicts describe the area as a haven for pill users looking for an easy score.

Certain areas of the South Florida counties are lined with "pain management clinics" where doctors dispense anything from Oxycontin and

Methadone to Dilaudid, a drug so strong that it is usually only administered in emergency rooms, Ramie said.

"These are cash businesses," Ramie said. "They don't take checks, ATM or credit cards or insurance."

Addicts band together in large groups and send two or three people down to South Florida to get large amounts of prescriptions and pills, Ramie said. They receive some of the pills while in the doctor's office, fill some of the prescriptions while they are still in south Florida and try to fill the rest when they return.

Some states have laws that track doctors, patients, and pharmacies, and make it very hard for the same person to multiple doctors and pharmacies looking for the same drug.

But not Florida, Bell lamented.

"We have lost control of controlled substances," she said.

Sheriff Frank McKeithen has sent a letter to local pharmacists asking them to turn away patients trying to fill pain prescriptions from south Florida.

"There are many good doctors and pharmacists in Bay County area that can effectively treat chronic pain, and I fail to see many valid reasons one would have to travel to South Florida to obtain these prescriptions," McKeithen wrote.

He also sent a pointed letter to Bill McCollum, Florida's Attorney General.

"It is unbelievable that this is occurring in the state of Florida," McKeithen wrote. "Why are we allowing this to happen? Please let me know what I, and my agency, can do to help stop this abuse."

McCollum has not yet responded, officials said.

"Florida should be embarrassed," Bell said.

"With the flip of a switch'

Addiction creates homeless children, increases the jail population and causes death and misery across the country but no one wants to pay for the best solution, said Buster Coleman, the executive director of the Emerald Coast division of the Children's Home Society.

"What I am finding is 80 percent of (the children removed from a home) substance abuse is the cause," said Coleman, a licensed mental health counselor who has worked with addicts for decades. "And yet the state will not address it."

Coleman, Ramie and others say there are too few substance abuse treatment centers in the Panhandle and that the existing centers are almost always full.

What the state and federal officials have done is put addicts in jails.

"It hasn't worked," Coleman said. "Yet, they continue to throw money at it with very limited success."

Bell and Ramie said they try to send addicts to the drug rehabilitation program operated through the court system.

"The people that are getting it and selling it, those are the people I want," Bell said. "They're making money off somebody else's weakness."

Florida needs a law, similar to laws in most of the rest of the country that allows pharmacies and doctors to track patients and prescriptions over the Internet, Bell and Ramie said.

If done right, it could be as effective as the national Combat Methamphetamine Act of 2005, which forced pharmacies to keep records on people buying cold and allergy products that contained the ingredients some dealers were using to make meth.

"That slowed the problem down," Bell said.

Florida lawmakers should pass a similar law that deals with Oxycodone, Oxycontin and other controlled substances, he said.

"This can be fixed like that," Bell said, snapping her fingers. "With the flip of a switch."