

Heroin may fill the void after pill mill crackdowns, authorities say

Posted: 10/17/2011

- Jerome Burdi, Sun Sentinel

As South Florida law enforcement is making headway in its fight against pill mills, there is a mounting concern that heroin could be the drug moving in to fill the void for addicts.

Oxycodone and heroin have similar chemical compositions, and many oxycodone addicts have been ingesting the pills in the same way addicts take heroin: sniffing and injecting, authorities said.

As the pills get more expensive and harder to get, heroin may be an addict's answer.

"We're going to see a heroin increase," said state Rep. Will Snyder, R-Stuart, a retired Miami-Dade police officer and a candidate for sheriff in Martin County. "These people are severely addicted. This is an all-encompassing, overwhelming addiction."

The Palm Beach County Multi-Agency Diversion Task Force — comprising local, state and federal law enforcement agencies fighting the trade in illegally sold prescription pills — reported that 3 pounds of heroin already has been seized in street deals this year, up from 20 grams last year.

The Metro Broward Drug Task Force reported no increases in heroin this year but is on alert.

For years, South Florida heroin has been supplied from Colombia, but now Mexican heroin, a purer strain, is making its way across the border, authorities said.

This as prescription-drug overdoses are dropping locally.

Last year, there were 365 prescription-drug overdose deaths in Palm Beach County, down from 429 in 2009, according to the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse. Broward County had 470 prescription overdoses last year, down from 490 in 2009, records show.

Dozens of pain clinics in both counties already have been shut down.

Florida's pain-pill database, which began operating this month, will log every pain-drug prescription purchase, allowing doctors, pharmacists and police to watch for illegal activity.

This, too, should reduce the illegal sale of prescription pills and make the price rise on the black market, authorities said.

Already, the street price of an oxycodone pill has gone from \$8 to \$15, according to the Palm Beach County task force. In states where pills are harder to come by, they go for up to \$45 per pill, the task force said.

"We're in a transitional period here," said Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office Capt. Eric Coleman, commander of the task force. "We've enjoyed some great success in the pill-mill issue. Our efforts are paying off. But in some ways we could potentially get worse before we get better."

"We're going to need some committed funding to help treat these people to bring them down off these addictions."

The National Drug Intelligence Center this year reported that Mexican criminal organizations are dominating the supply of drugs increasingly used by youths in the United States, including heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine.

"We've been very concerned that heroin looming on the horizon is almost a perfect storm out in the sea," said Jim Hall, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale.

Many heroin addicts switched to oxycodone in the early 2000s when the pills were becoming readily available, experts said. That's around the time pill-based overdoses started to rise and heroin overdoses dropped, Hall said.

Last year, there were five heroin overdoses in Broward County and four in Palm Beach County, according to the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse.

"People shooting heroin before [pills were popular] got these prescription drugs cheaper," said Fort Lauderdale Police Detective Travis Mandell. "They had this misconception that because it was from a lab, it was safer."

Karen Perry, executive director of the West Palm Beach-based nonprofit Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education, said her son switched from prescription pills to heroin, and the fatal mix in his blood led to an overdose in 2003 at the age of 21.

"They get addicted to the pills, and it's the same powerful addiction as the heroin," Perry said. "The scary part about it is if they are already melting things and already starting to inject, it's not going to scare them. They are just worried about what they're going to get to keep their addiction going. Their mind is not clear."

People who are looking for assistance with drug addiction issues can call the South Florida 211 hotline.

Staff Writer Kathleen Haughney and Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.

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