

# Pill mills targeted at Palm Beach County drug abuse summit

February 22, 2010|By Andy Reid, Sun Sentinel

After listening to legislators, lawmen and physicians talk Monday about the difficulties of policing "pill mills," a mother shared the horror of burying her son after an overdose.

Richard Perry Jr. died at age 21 after struggling with an addiction to prescription drugs.

"The tears just flowed covering it," Karen Perry said about hugging her son's casket seven years ago. "I wanted so desperately to see and touch my son one more time. ... There's nothing that we would not have done to save our son."

To save other sons and daughters, Karen Perry and her family started the [Palm Beach County](#)-based anti-drug organization NOPE -- Narcotics Overdose and Prevention Education -- that warns students, parents and community groups about the dangers of illegally used prescription drugs.

On Monday, her story was the emotional end to a summit of lawmakers, politicians and doctors gathered west of West Palm Beach to discuss ways to better confront drug abuse and to rein in the spread of pain-management clinics blamed for supplying addicts.

[Palm Beach County](#) in December became one of the first local governments to put a moratorium on new pain clinics -- loosely regulated establishments blamed for fueling the spread of illegally obtained prescription drugs.

A problem that authorities said gained steam in [Broward County](#) has spilled over into [Palm Beach County](#) with more than 100 clinics taking root.

[Palm Beach County](#)'s temporary ban on new clinics in unincorporated areas gives the county time to craft rules intended to squeeze out "pill mills," without threatening legitimate pain-management clinics run by doctors treating back pain and other chronic ailments.

[Palm Beach County](#) had 308 overdoses in 2008, the most recent statistics available to the Sheriff's Office. That was more than the number of people killed in automobile-related fatalities and is the most common call for [Palm Beach County](#) Sheriff's Office homicide detectives.

"We have evolved into this nation of enthusiastic but ill-informed prescription drug users," Det. Gary Martin said. "We need to raise public consciousness for this issue."

Part of the problem remains Florida's lax controls over pain-management clinics, authorities said. The clinics make it easy for addicts to fuel their drug problems and a

lack of limits on the number of pills that can be prescribed bring buyers from as far away as Maine, Ohio and Kentucky to acquire drugs that they sell illegally elsewhere, law enforcement officials said.

Buyers are "coming here like it's Disney World and helping themselves to as many pills as they can get," Assistant State Attorney Uriel Neto said.

Legislators representing Broward and Palm Beach counties are pushing new laws to try to stop the spread of narcotics from pain clinics.

State Rep. Joseph Abruzzo, D-[Wellington](#), proposed a bill that would require clinics to be run by physicians. He also proposes banning advertisements that lure customers to easy-access drugs and he would limit the amount of pills the clinics can distribute.

Abruzzo's proposal caps on-site distribution to a three-day supply, requiring patients to go through a pharmacy for more pills.

Officials also plan to explore measures to allow physicians to report patients suspected of doctor shopping, despite patient confidentiality laws, as well as notifying families of college-age patients who survive an overdose.

[Palm Beach County](#) Commissioner Karen Marcus called for physician groups to play a bigger role by helping identify and punish doctors writing illegitimate prescriptions

Tougher rules for the drug companies supplying clinics should also be considered, said pharmacist Barry Paraizo, who owns Winships Prescription Center.

"Let's look at the source," he said.

While officials push for tougher state rules, more local communities in addition to [Palm Beach County](#) are passing their own measures.

[Boca Raton](#) City Council has agreed to consider restrictions on pain clinics; West Palm Beach also is considering tougher rules.

In [Broward County](#), Coconut Creek, Dania Beach, Weston and Davie have endorsed similar measures to at least temporarily ban new clinics and create tougher restrictions.

Fort Lauderdale gave tentative approval to a 180-day moratorium on new pain clinics. A final vote is set for March 2. [Broward County](#) officials today take up the issue with the creation of a task force to look at regulating or banning pain clinics in unincorporated areas. The task force is to report back by Oct. 31.

Staff Writer Brittany Wallman contributed to this report.

Andy Reid can be reached at [abreid@sunsentinel.com](mailto:abreid@sunsentinel.com) or 561-228-5504

