After the state’s prescription pill mill crackdown, pressure mounts on treatment system as addicts seek alternatives.

by John Pacenti
jpacenti@alm.com

Whoever said drug addiction is a victimless crime never met St. Joseph’s Women’s Hospital in Tampa. Nearly one in 10 babies are born to mothers addicted to drugs, with the highest percentage dependent on the prescription painkiller oxycodone.

Neonatal abstinence syndrome is the name given to effects of drug withdrawal on newborns. Symptoms may include sensitivity to light and noise, poor feeding and poor weight gain. In addition, these infants often have incessant high-pitched crying as well as seizures and tremors. They are frequently premature.

“They have similar types of symptoms that the average drug addict would have withdrawing — only it’s shocking to see them in a baby,” said nurse Karen Howell, director of patient care services.

Doctors at St. Joseph’s have no choice but to give the newborns morphine and wean them off opiates, taking an average of a month before sending them home, hoping for the best.

It’s in the neonatal intensive care units, treatment facilities and back-alley meetings of desperation and opportunity where the war on Florida’s prescription epidemic is being fought.

Pill mills that contribute to an average of seven overdose deaths a day in Florida are being driven out of business. Florida, once the nation’s poster child for prescription medication abuse, is pursuing a multi-pronged approach pushed by Attorney General Pam Bondi that combines law enforcement, regulations and new laws.

How bad was it? Of an estimated 53 million oxycodone doses sold nationally in 2010, nearly 45 million were purchased in Florida. In September 2009, 33 of the nation’s top 50 dispensing practitioners of oxycodone were in Broward County and 49 were in Florida.

Out-of-state addicts would hit as many pain clinics as they could before heading home. Strips along Oakland Park and Hollywood boulevards in Broward County were dotted with pain clinics nearly next door to each other. One chain of clinics allegedly was run by convicted heroin trafficker Vincent Colangelo. The Davie man is accused of unloading 770,000 pain pills in a year and palling in $150,000 a day. A typical visit by an addict could cost upwards of $2,000.

“Some of these pill mills looked like Black Friday at a Wal-Mart. They had hundreds of people coming in daily from out of state. That’s when you know you had a problem,” said Capt. Eric Coleman, commander of the Palm Beach sheriff’s narcotics division.

But since the launch of Florida’s statewide drug enforcement strike force, law enforcement made 1,237 arrests, including 22 doctors, and seized 284,138 pills, 57 weapons, 45 vehicles and $2.3 million from March to mid-October.

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder came to Tampa on Friday to address efforts to combat the illegal distribution of prescription drugs.

RELATED PROBLEMS

New statistics indicate a 17 percent drop in oxycodone purchases by Florida’s pharmacies and practitioners for the first five months of the year compared to the same period last year, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

The crackdown on prescription pill mills is one accomplishment Gov. Rick Scott, touting in poor poll numbers, can trumpet even though he initially opposed a prescription drug monitoring database.

But fighting drugs is often like swatting at flies. Closing pill mills has left too much to the community. Law enforcement and the substance abuse recovery community say the results are a spike in petty crime, such as burglaries and car break-ins; a jump in heroin use, especially of a high-quality product from Mexico; and full detox and treatment beds at publicly funded facilities.

“Treatment is the solution” is the cry from those who work in substance abuse recovery and agencies like the state Department of Children and Families. But will state lawmakers cough up money to treat drug addicts when they are facing a $2 billion shortfall in the budget year starting July 1?

“Without treatment we are only going to see all of the other related problems become more severe: crime, continued illicit drug dealing, deaths and medical emergencies,” said James N. Hall, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse co-sponsored by Nova Southeastern University.

Mark Fontaine, executive director of the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association, said it’s imperative that more treatment is made available.

“Now that the budget got tough again, we will see what happens,” he said. “But I think there is a growing understanding as you shut down the pill mills, addicted individuals are going to need access to detox and treatment.”
State Sen. Mike Fesano, R-New Port Richey, sponsored the anti-pill mill legislation earlier this year. He said lawmakers recognize another step must be taken to provide more recovery for addicts. "It's the trickle-down effect," he said. "Yes, we are closing down the unscrupulous pill mills and we are going after those who are essentially drug pushers, but you still have the individuals who have an addiction. Either we help them or they wind up in the emergency room—and that will cost taxpayers more money."

DIDN'T STAY SOBER

Colin B., who works in the recovery community in Boca Raton and doesn't want his last name published, migrated to Florida from Connecticut to get clean. He mostly did heroin, but when he came to South Florida, he relapsed in the use of prescription pills.

"I didn't stay sober. I did pills. That's what was there and what was inexpensive. I chewed them, I sniffed them, and I shot them," he said. "South Florida is notorious for pain clinics. The pills in Florida have been around for a number of years. Before I got sober, they were already huge."

He worries that the crackdown on prescription drug abuse will hurt those who really need the drugs for severe pain. "It's a real tough pill in that respect," he said. "I have seen a lot of people who've gone downhill with these pills, and I have seen people use them as directed and use them as pain management. They are cancer patients, people who are very sick, people who have been in these horrible accidents."

These days Colin helps other addicts, reaching out to them by phone to try get them into recovery. There are beds for those who have health insurance or can pay, but an addict at rock bottom most likely has neither. That's when publicly funded facilities come into play. Open beds at these places are very scarce right now.

Fontaine said his organization networks with treatment facilities.

"Right now, detox beds in Florida as I understand it are full as of last week," he said. "I called a half dozen providers, and we are talking about anywhere from two days to a week to wait for admission. These are safety net providers."

Hall said he's hearing the same scenario.

"Everyone involved in substance treatment, particularly in Broward and the Panhandle, are being overwhelmed with demand for treatment of opiate addiction," he said.

Broward County had the most demand in South Florida for government-funded treatment last year with 1,035 admissions, according to DCF. Palm Beach had 514, and Miami-Dade had 226.

Stephanie W. Colston, the department's director of substance abuse and mental health programs, told lawmakers Oct. 6 that the state is meeting only 11 percent of the need for substance abuse treatment for the uninsured and underinsured.

"When law enforcement began to crack down on these pill mills, we began to see an increase in the demand for prescriptions," she said. "However, we have not been able to keep up with the demand."

DCF has trained investigators in Broward and Palm Beach counties to identify the difference between legitimate and illegitimate prescription drug use. They are ready with intervention protocols that link affected families with substance abuse and mental health treatment providers. And now the state's prescription drug monitoring also online, allowing physicians and pharmacists to discover if a patient is doctor shopping—hopping from physician to physician for prescriptions. With a ban on drug distribution at pain clinics, addicts must take prescriptions to a pharmacy, which can alert authorities to abuse.

"The triage for this public health epidemic and crisis of prescription drug abuse is one, save lives; two, treat addiction; and three, promote the appropriate use of medications," Hall said.

FILLING THE VOID

Without a treatment option, addicts are looking for the street equivalent of OxyContin.

"We have been concerned about that from the beginning," Hall said. "In the storm of opiate withdrawal, any narcotic port will do."

Of particular concern, Hall said, is word that Mexican traffickers have perfected their processing and are now trafficking in a purer, and deadlier, form of heroin. Usually, brown heroin doesn't move east of the Mississippi River, but it now has a hold in Brevard created by the demise of the pill mills.

Just last Wednesday, the U.S. attorney's office charged 13 people—including nine Port Everglades workers—in a conspiracy to smuggle 144 pounds of cocaine and heroin with an estimated street value of $2.5 million through the Broward County seaport. OxyContin is the street name for oxycodone.

Oxycodone is a synthetic heroin. OxyContin is a time-release brand version. Users prefer it to other types of prescription painkillers, like Vicodin, which adds acetaminophen.

Coleman of the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office said heroin is already making its mark in his jurisdiction on trafficking routes established for cocaine and marijuana.

"We have seen a noticeable increase. Three pounds of heroin have been taken off the street," he said. "Last year, it was a miniscule amount, like an ounce."

But Florida had little choice but to target pill mills first and face the fallout. The death rate from oxycodone increased 265 percent from 2003 to 2009, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. By 2009, the number of deaths from prescription drugs was four times that of street drugs.

Scott signed a law in June requiring doctors to use tamper-proof prescription pads or electronic prescriptions, toughen penalties for doctors who overprescribe painkillers and ban most doctors from dispensing the drugs. The Florida Department of Health can issue emergency suspensions of doctors' licenses.

MASS SHUTDOWNS

Florida may have been slow to ac-
COVER STORY: Bondi said taking on pill mills a top priority

knowledge its problems but may offer a guide for other states to address their own prescription drug abuse problem.

"Although we weren't first at the table, we are going to finish strong," Coleman said.

In Palm Beach County alone, the number of pain clinics have been cut from more than 100 to about 50, and dispensers are now required to register with the state. Eighteen doctors, two dentists and two pharmacists have been arrested in the county. The state has suspended the licenses of 29 doctors, Coleman said.

He is hearing from colleagues in other divisions that petty crime like car break-ins, larceny and shoplifting is on the upswing. Thieves are looking for something quick to steal and trade or sell for drugs, he said.

"Those who need to support their addiction are not able to get this product from the doctors," Coleman said. "They turn to the street, and the price has doubled. In some ways, we are going to see it get worse before it gets better."

The price of a pill has gone from $7 to $15 or even $20 in South Florida. In Kentucky, one oxycodone pill can run $30.

Earlier this month, two South Florida brothers were arrested by Deerfield Beach police for about 30 vehicle break-ins allegedly to feed their drug habits. In August, one thief hit 30 cars at three Hialeah complexes.

Danny Alexander at the Auto Glass Stop in Miami said business has been good fixing broken glass.

"There's been a lot of times I would get cars coming in from the same block," he said. "People are getting their laptops, cell phones and purses stolen."

Pharmacies also have been targeted by burglars, and police have advised owners to increase their security.

"It's a very valuable product now, and it has to be guarded," Coleman said.

One upside for Florida is the pill mill crackdown has pushed some of the problem to other states. Coleman said Georgia has seen pain clinics popping up.

"Missouri may become the next ground zero for this," he said.

It's not unusual for semi-trailer trucks filled with painkillers to disappear en route to

State Attorney General Pam Bondi wants to establish a strike force to address neonatal withdrawal syndrome.

CANDACE WEST

EMERGENCY ACTION

While law enforcement targets pill mills, those in the treatment arena stress education is key to preventing another round of addicts. They stress not mixing drugs. Almost all overdoses are cocktails of alcohol, painkillers and other drugs, such as the anti-anxiety medication Xanax.

"The most important thing is to get them off their addiction, but that plan was abandoned in favor of a gradual reduction because there are no outpatient programs for babies like there are for adults," said Karen S. Perry, executive director of the NOPE Task Force, which fosters drug abuse education and programs in West Palm Beach.

Perry said the program is not a follow-up treatment for overdose survivors. About 38 percent of fatal overdoses in Palm Beach County involve people who were hospitalized and survived a previous overdose.

The program is run by the National Opiate Policy Evaluation and Minimization Education Task Force, Perry said, and is not a "treatment as usual." It teaches patients and their parents that taking fewer drugs is better for them and their families.

"They are often difficult babies, irritable, irritable and cry a lot," she said. "These are the ones you hear suffer from shaken baby syndrome. Their parents often already have decreased capacity for tolerance for life stressors, and their parenting skills are not optimal."