

The Killer Amongst us

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There is no doubt, the public must be warned. A cruel killer exists amongst us and despite law enforcement's best intentions and efforts; the death toll from this foe rises daily. The mortality statistics attributed to this killer are both appalling and heartrending with approximately 22,000 yearly fatalities nationwide (CDC, 2007). Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) recorded nearly 3000 lives lost to this assassin in our state alone last year and sadly, the lethal tally for 2008 reveals more of the same.

The Victims

The victims come from all walks and various backgrounds. The dead range in ages from 1 – 82 years, with middle age men far and away the most common target. Most often, this quiet slayer strikes abruptly while victims are relaxing or sleeping in their own homes. In each tragic case, the decedents knew their attacker and willingly invited the assailant into their lives and subsequently into their deaths. Evidence at casualty scenes confirms that most of the victims went to their demise quietly; their lives snuffed out without struggle, outcry or resistance. What enemy could reap such an inconspicuous slaughter? Why is there no public uproar? How can this be? Quite simply, **drug overdose** is a soundless, relentless and unpretentious killer.

The Legacy of these Deaths

For some time now, discouraged law enforcement insiders have stood solitary witness to this epidemic of needless and preventable drug overdose deaths. Powerless and frustrated, responding officers can offer little more than mere condolences as stricken families struggle to make sense of their sudden personal catastrophes. Social science research tells us that for each one of these deaths, six additional people are significantly and intimately impacted. Children are left without mothers; parents grieve lost children; wives mourn dead husbands and so forth and so on. The family legacy of these cases is both profound and long-lasting.

Amazingly, the general public only seems interested in these deaths when celebrities fall prey. The unfortunate cases of Anna Nicole Smith and Heath Ledger provided the nation with weeks of media attention and fascination for this topic. However, public fascination wanes and curiosity fades while this killer remains potent and more active than ever.

What We Know about this Killer

Drug overdose deaths are now second only to car crashes for unintentional injury deaths in United States (CDC, 2007). In most jurisdictions, contemporary overdose statistics far outstretch the number of homicides. Consistent research findings tell us that this spike in overdose fatalities is directly related to our nation's ever escalating use and abuse of prescription drugs. Data suggests that every month, nearly 7 million Americans aged 12 or older use prescription drugs for **non-medical purposes**. Plainly stated, we are a nation of ill-informed, willing prescription pill consumers, and as fate would have it, the pharmacies are where this killer stalks his victims.

The Overdose Suppression Project

Like most societal ills, the causes of drug overdose are complex. There are no simple remedies or straightforward solutions. Therefore, our approach must be both broad and flexible. The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office Overdose Suppression Project offers such a comprehensive strategy. The overall plan involves three separate, but related components:

1. The **Law Enforcement Component** aims at reducing future overdose deaths by arresting and thereby deterring drug offenders. Simply put, the law enforcement strategy involves applying any

and all relevant criminal statutes to those individuals found criminally liable for any aspect of another's overdose death. In this effort, we have broadened the list of crimes that we now consider in these cases to include everything from delivery of controlled substances, to evidence tampering, to improper disturbance of human remains. If we can determine that a person took any active role in another's overdose death, we are going to find a way arrest him or her. In addition, we are scouring the facts of these overdose cases for any potential narcotics related intelligence. Information obtained is then relayed directly to specifically assigned narcotics agents who then open proactive investigations into suspects' potential future crimes.

2. The **Quantitative Research Component** helps explain the phenomenon of overdose death from a scientific perspective. The idea here is to conduct systematic research designed to expose any situational or demographic patterns that may exist among drug overdose deaths. Such patterns lay a foundation for future public awareness campaigns, intervention efforts or preventive legislative actions. In this endeavor, we meet with victim's family members or close friends from each and every overdose fatality. In those meetings, we inquire about many different variables, everything from the victim's level of education to his or her drug habits. We recognize that before we can positively impact an issue as complex as drug overdose, we must first thoroughly understand the phenomenon.
3. The **Public Relations/Education Component** strives to raise consciousness. Community indifference to these tragedies will only change when citizens sincerely accept the notion that the next heartbreak could be their own. Such recognition promotes increased risk awareness as well as cooperative prevention efforts. This multifaceted dimension of the project includes a number of established strategic alliances:
 - The Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education Task Force
 - Lynn University (Boca Raton)
 - The Hanley Center (West Palm Beach)
 - Palm Beach County Substance Abuse Coalition
 - The Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office
 - The Florida Office of Drug Control
 - The Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office

Within this component we are:

- forging relationships with families who have lost loved ones to drug overdose death
- offering monthly support group meetings for family members seeking comfort
- designing a multimedia campaign to increase public awareness about the risks associated with prescription drug misuse and abuse
- seeking legislative changes intended to close loopholes that encourage doctor shopping and other forms of prescription drug diversion.

If you would like to learn more or join in our efforts to diminish the number of drug overdose deaths in our state, please visit the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office main webpage www.pbso.org--click on Drug Overdose Prevention Information or contact Detective Gary Martin 561-688-4058 or marting@pbso.org.