

More in N.H. die from Rx overdoses than car crashes

N.H. medical examiner warns of growing threat of Rx drug abuse

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More New Hampshire residents died last year from prescription drug overdoses than injuries from car crashes, according to state Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Tom Andrew.

"That's ridiculous," said Andrew, who logged 160 prescription drug deaths during 2009.

Eighty-three of the deceased had prescriptions for the drug that killed them and most were "illicitly obtained," he said. The culprits were opiates — narcotic pain relievers which work as designed, but are also addictive, he warned. The sources were "doctor shopping," medical clinics and emergency rooms.

Methadone in pill form topped the list as causing the most New Hampshire deaths. Behind it was oxycodone, cocaine, heroin, Citalopram, morphine, Alprazolam and more.

In Portsmouth, the same drugs are being abused by young adults and high school students, said police Capt. Corey MacDonald.

"They're crushing them and snorting them. Or crushing them and taking them with a drink," he said. "About half of our drug investigations involve the sale of prescription drugs. It's amazing the amount of pills going around."

According to the federal Drug Enforcement Agency, 10 percent of all high school students abuse prescription drugs. Regionally, the numbers may be even worse.

The recently released 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey for southeastern New Hampshire found more than 20 percent of high school students used prescription drugs including OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin, Adderall, Ritalin or Xanax without a prescription. It also reported 11 percent of students used over-the-counter drugs to get high. About 3,800 students from seven regional high schools were surveyed by ONE Voice for Southeastern New Hampshire, United Way of the Greater Seacoast, the N.H. Department of Education and N.H. Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services.

There's a perception among local youths that pills are safe because they're not street drugs, MacDonald said.

"A lot of them are getting them from their grandparents' medicine cabinets," he said.

New Hampshire residents who died prescription-drug deaths last year fall into two categories, said the chief medical examiner. The first is people who obtained post-surgical or injury-related pain medications, then became addicted and started "doctor shopping" for more. The others were recreational users who also became addicted.

"They enjoy the drug, so in turn they take more and more until eventually they die," he said.

New Hampshire holds the distinction of being first in the nation to have more of its citizens die from pills (160 in 2009) than car crashes (130 in 2009), Andrew said. In comparison, there were 15 homicides, 10 of them gun deaths.

The medical examiner said he started seeing the upswing in drug deaths in 2000 or 2001 with the advent of Oxycontin and oxycodone. Then came cheaper methadone.

Doctors should monitor what they prescribe, Andrew said, noting most people know someone with a bottle of pain killers in a medicine cabinet that was prescribed following a sprain when only two pills were needed.

For a statewide solution, New Hampshire need only look to the neighboring states of Massachusetts, Vermont and Maine, he said. Those states have electronic monitoring systems, which allow drug stores to share information about who got which prescribed drugs and when. With that data, a pharmacist presented with a prescription for an opiate by "Johnny Backache" can see if Backache obtained a similar recent prescription

"This is all information that is stored somewhere," Andrew said. "Rite Aid has theirs. CVS has theirs. But they're not talking to each other."

Thirty-eight states have a unified system, some of them in place for 40 years, Andrew said. And with New Hampshire's neighbors watching their prescription sales while we do not, he asked, "Guess where they're going to go to get their drugs?"

Andrew is part of a task force that has been advocating for the system and says there's federal money to jump-start the program. The medical sector "has agreed in principal" to assess members a fee to sustain it, he said.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Justice hosted a Prescription Drug Summit on March 30 when Gov. John Lynch urged law enforcement, doctors, treatment providers and legislators "to work together" to "address the threat from misused prescription drugs."

During the same summit, Dr. Seddon Savage from the Dartmouth Center of Addiction Recovery and Education urged physicians "to balance legitimate medical purposes against potential consequences."

At home, parents are encouraged to clean out their medicine cabinets. Portsmouth police will collect unused drugs and turn them over to the state for disposal.