

Rx drug abuse surging in Maine

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CALAIS - They may alleviate pain, but they are also a pain in the neck for local law enforcement agencies.

Legitimate prescription pain pills such as OxyContin have found their way out of medicine cabinets and into the hands of abusers at an alarming rate in Maine, according to experts.

Some drugs have been diverted by those holding prescriptions; others have been stolen from legitimate users.

The numbers are startling as law enforcement officials, members of the medical community and social agencies learned Friday at a daylong conference called Prescription Drugs Issues and Actions, sponsored by the Calais Weed and Seed initiative and Neighbors Against Drug Abuse.

The event was held at the St. Croix Country Club and attracted some 70 participants.

"In states looking at how pharmaceuticals related to violent crime for the past four years, Maine has been Number One," said Dr. Stevan Edward Gressitt, noting 35.3 percent of drug-related violent crimes in the state are related to prescription drugs, up from 26.8 percent in 2002 [compared with other drugs like cocaine, heroin and marijuana]. Gressitt is medical director of the Northeast Occupational Exchange in Bangor.

"When it comes to [prescription drug-related] property crime, Maine has gone from third place in 2003 to first place in 2004 and has maintained first place with a nine-point increase in this past year as well," he said.

Gressitt said there is no sign the trend is leveling off.

"The entire trend is upward for pharmaceuticals being the greatest specific drug threat for the state of Maine," he said. "They are the drugs of greatest availability in the state of Maine as opposed to other kinds of drugs."

And the drugs come from a variety of sources that include doctors who overprescribe; patients with legitimate prescriptions who divert; changes in prescriptions and the old pills are not disposed of; and leftover prescriptions from people who have died.

"In 2004, it was perceived to be easier to get drugs in Maine than any other state. In 2005 and 2006 we dropped a bit, but anybody want to argue that 10th of a point?" Gressitt said.

The numbers were compiled by the National Drug Intelligence Center in Johnstown, Pa.

Solutions are needed. "The issue is, At what point will there be an approach that will involve the medical community, the law enforcement community and the insurance industry for specific policies which drives some of this problem?" he said.

The state has stepped in with a solution — a partial one at least.

The days of flushing pills down the drain are no longer an option because of the impact on the environment. Dumping them into landfills spreads the risk of diversion. "There are examples of where that's actually occurred where people have gone through landfills looking for pill bottles," Gressitt said.

The Maine Legislature has offered an unfunded solution to "take back" pills.

"This is the first law in the nation regarding the disposal of unused prescription drugs," Attorney General Steve Rowe said Friday. "This new law designates the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency as the administrator. ... This law requires that prepaid mailing envelopes are used and made available to the public at various locations."

The bill also allows for pills to be returned to a single collection point.

Rowe talked about the "take-back" program for Maine communities. Recently, South Portland held one and collected 55,000 pills in one day. The plan calls for communities to designate a site where unused prescription pills can be turned in.

There are guidelines:

- One uniformed law enforcement officer must be present during the take-back program.
- Only pills and tablets can be collected.
- Only medications generated through normal household use are collected.
- If possible, medications should be collected in their original packages.
- Prescription privacy should be maintained by obliterating the name of the user on the package.

After the event, the collection containers are sealed and the law enforcement officer is to handle and store the container of medications in the same manner as evidence seized in a criminal case, Rowe said. The medications are then turned over to MDEA.