

Prescription for abuse of potent drugs

Teens taking substances from medicine cabinets

By **ED JOHNSON**
STAFF WRITER

The diversion and abuse of prescription medicine has become the greatest challenge drug enforcers have faced in more than a generation, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said.

Pills such as oxycodone and Percocet have all the kick of heroin without the stigma of being seen as low-class street drugs. Their availability in suburban communities has made them the drugs of choice for many teenagers, police and the DEA said.

There's also the tranquilizer Xanax, rapidly on its way to being the most widely abused pill among middle and high schoolers, police and the DEA said.

At the other end of the spectrum there's Adderall and Ritalin, stimulants used to treat children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity

See **Drugs, Page A4**
disorder, or ADHD, but often taken by others to get a "speed"-like high, police said.

This is the new face of drug abuse. It has the potential to eclipse traditional street drugs and supplant designer drugs such

as Ecstasy.

It's a challenge that many law officers have yet to fully recognize.

That's the assessment of the DEA and a number of local law enforcement agencies as officers map plans to attack the problem with a mixture of task force investigations, enhanced training for police and public education programs.

It won't be easy, said Gerard P. McAleer, special agent in charge of the DEA in New Jersey.

It's a problem that has been brewing for years, and its effects are more profound in New Jersey because of the state's position as the epicenter for the manufacture of pharmaceuticals as well as the import and export of those drugs, he said.

McAleer said he's trying to map out a coordinated, long-term campaign that will join the DEA into ever-closer working relationships with police and prosecutors at the municipal, county and state levels.

"No one agency has the ability to do the job alone," he said. "Teaming together we have a force multiplier effect. The days when agencies could go it alone are over."

The fight against the illegal use of prescription drugs is going to take every level of law enforcement, he said.

"We have investigators who are specialists in drug diversion investigations," he said. "They know what to look for and how to streamline those searches, but

that's only one part of the problem. On the street, the patrol officer is the person who is most likely to encounter the problem, and we have to give them the training to not only know what they're seeing, but the tools to fight it."

In the last month, police in Keansburg, Middletown, Wall, Howell and Ocean Township each have arrested people for the illegal possession of oxycodone, records show.

It's a potent painkiller that some of its users see as a cleaner, safer alternative to street drugs like heroin, McAleer said.

Howell police Capt. Steven Dreher agrees it's a growing problem.

His officers were used to people trying to pass fake prescriptions at area pharmacies, but the increase in "hand-to-hand sales" has shown us that the problem is more prevalent than we had thought," he said.

The prescription painkillers are in such demand that a Howell pharmacy was robbed two weeks ago by a bandit who ran off with a bottle of Roxicodone, also a painkiller.

"Figure the bottle had 180 pills, and those pills can probably be sold for \$20 or more apiece. That's a lucrative business," Dreher said.

"They associate heroin with a dope fiend, but oxy, that's prescribed by doctors. It's got to be OK. The problem is, it's every bit as deadly and addictive," Dreher said.

And in New Jersey's bedroom communities, it can also be easier to get, police said.

Four Howell police officers were among the close to 200 detectives and patrol officers who recently packed a DEA training course on prescription drugs held at Rutgers University's Cook Campus in New Brunswick.

McAleer said those training programs are essential to stopping the flow of diverted prescription medications.

"They're the people who will encounter it first," McAleer said of municipal police. "In a way, they're our eyes and ears."

There's also a lot to know about tracking what's out there, said Broward County, Fla., Sheriff's Sgt. Lisa McElhaney.

She's worked prescription drug



ASBURY PARK SUNDAY PRESS

Date: Sunday, June 22, 2008
Location: NEPTUNE, NJ
Circulation (DMA): 192,581 (1)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: A1, A4
Keyword: Partnership For A Drug-Free NJ

cases for more than 19 years, and now the DEA is using her to help train her New Jersey counterparts, McAleer said.

The first step is to help patrol officers and detectives recognize an illegal substance, she said. Unlike a bag of dope or vial of crack, prescription medicines can look like something that's legally possessed, she said.

"You stop someone, and they seem to be under the influence of something, but you don't find any drugs, and there's no odor of alcohol. Then you find the pill bottle. Say it's OxyContin, but the person has a prescription pill bottle for the stuff in his name. Everything checks, right?"

Maybe. Police are now being taught to go the next step and check the brand on the bottle label with the brand of pill inside the bottle. A lot of times they won't match up, and you have the beginnings of a case, she said.

Investigators will now try to use the identifying data on the pills to trace them back to an ultimate supplier, she said.

Sometimes abusers and dealers also will try to get additional pills by claiming a legitimate prescription was lost or stolen.

Patrol officers are now being taught to ask additional questions, such as: What doctor prescribed the medicine? What pharmacy filled it?

Unlike heroin and cocaine, prescription medicines are not per se illegal, police said. That means almost all originate from a legal source and are then diverted, the DEA said.

"We have to make people aware of the problem," McAleer said. "Not just the police. The public. I gave a talk to a group in northern New Jersey a while back, and I explained to them how teenagers often steal these drugs from relatives," McAleer said.

"A woman came to me with tears in her eyes. She said that until that moment she never realized how her daughter got hooked on prescription painkillers. She told me she had actually been proud that her daughter had

wanted to spend so much time visiting her grandmother, who was dying from cancer. The grandmother had been prescribed the painkiller fentanyl."

In an ad campaign being launched by the Partnership for a Drug Free New Jersey, the family medicine chest is being identified as the most likely source of illegal pills for middle and high school students.

From OxyContin to Xanax, and even the cough suppressant Promethazine, the family medicine chest is often an addict's starting point, said DEA Agent Douglas Collier.

Sometimes it's pills that are left over from a tooth extraction, the Percocet that wasn't used but kept for a future emergency, that become an abuser's stash, agents said.

In some cases, workers such as plumbers or home improvement contractors gain access to the medicine chest and clip a few pills at a time, Collier said. Not enough to cause suspicion, but



enough to feed their habits, he said.

In Little Egg Harbor, police arrested a Barnegat woman on June 13 for allegedly stealing prescription medicines from a home where she was employed as a cleaning lady, police said.

The elderly frequently are targeted for this kind of theft, Manchester police Detective Mark Cure said.

The reason is twofold, Cure said. First, they probably won't notice a few missing pills. Second, the doctor who refills the prescription will be less suspicious of an older person who seems to be using her prescriptions too fast as opposed to a 20-something who's burning through her supply, he said.

"Manchester is about 70 percent age-restricted communities," Cure said. "We do get reports of landscape workers who ask to use the bathroom and then help themselves to what's in the medicine cabinet."

"We tell people to count their pills," Collier said. "It's the quickest way to tell if you're being stolen from."

But not all prescription drugs are diverted by petty thieves, the DEA said. Some can be diverted from the factories where they are made, and others can be smuggled in from outside the United States, McAleer said. Those investigations are the domain of DEA diversion investigators, he said.

Other sources are physicians who choose to violate the law and, arguably, their oaths, McAleer said.

"I want to stress that doctors who essentially become illegal drug suppliers are about one tenth of one percent of the 35,000 licensed physicians in this state who are authorized to dispense drugs," McAleer said.

One physician who has been accused of that crime is Dr. Phillip B. Eatough, a pain management specialist, now facing federal drug and money laundering charges. His Keansburg office has since been shuttered, but he continues a limited practice in Middletown.

Police and federal agents charged Eatough, 61, of Rumson, after a five-year criminal investigation, a federal grand jury indictment said. His license to practice medicine has been restricted by the New Jersey State Board of Medical Examiners pending a decision on whether it should be revoked, the state Attorney General's Office said.

"For the most part, doctors, nurses and pharmacists are honorable people," McAleer said. "But like any profession, they have their rogues."



A poster warns of the potential for abuse of prescriptions drugs. (STAFF PHOTO: MICHAEL SYNIEWSKI)

Printing imperfections
present during scanning

