

Restrictions Sought for Certain Cough Medicines

HE was 87, but Anthony Vieiro of Yonkers still had many good years ahead of him, his grieving family and friends say, citing his vigor and exercise regimen.

They certainly never expected to lose him in a car accident last year, caused by a young driver high on over-the-counter medication containing dextromethorphan. Commonly known as DXM, the drug is found in cough suppressants like Robitussin, Sudafed and Tylenol products, and can cause hallucinations, seizures and death when taken in large quantities. Its illicit use is commonly called robotripping.

"I had never even heard of this 'robotripping' until it killed my father," said Mr. Vieiro's daughter, Linda Vieiro-Minozzi, of Dobbs Ferry, a mother and grandmother. "I've talked to other parents, and they have no clue this is going on."

Drug abuse prevention groups and lawmakers nationwide are trying to curb the problem, especially among teenagers. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America says 10 percent of teenagers have gotten high on DXM.

Nine Westchester County teenagers were treated for DXM exposure last year, and three have been treated so far this year, according to reports received by the New York Regional Poison Control Center.

The center said it had received calls about 28 teenagers treated for DXM exposure last year in Suffolk County, and 19 this year. Nassau County, which had 17 cases last year, has had 13 this year, the center said.

The Connecticut Poison Control Center reported 118 teenage DMX exposure cases last year, and 62 so far this year.

According to the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System, 205 teenagers in the state were treated for exposure last year, and the number is 107 so far this year. It was 70 in 2000.

"There's no question that this is a problem that has gotten worse," said Dr. Steven M. Marcus, executive medical director of the New Jersey organization.

In response, Westchester may become the third New York county, following Nassau and Suffolk, to ban the sale of medications containing DXM to anyone under 18. The County Board of Legislators will hold a hearing Monday before voting on the bill, which Mr. Vieiro's children hope becomes known as Anthony's Law.

"I'm not saying this would have saved my father's life," Linda Vieiro-Minozzi's brother, Gary Vieiro, said, noting that Mohd Shreiqein, who is serving a one- to three-year prison term for criminally negligent homicide, was 20 when he crashed into the elder Mr. Vieiro's car. "But right now, it's like the legal system is saying it's O.K."

If Mr. Shreiqein, of Pleasantville, had gone into a pharmacy and seen a sign about restrictions on DXM, he might have thought twice about taking it, said Mr. Vieiro, who lives in Encino, Calif. "The awareness of the danger is not there," he said.

The Westchester bill, introduced by Legislator Judith A. Myers, is modeled after the laws adopted in 2007 against selling medicine containing DXM to customers under 19 in Suffolk County and

under 18 in Nassau. Similar bans are under committee review in the [United States Senate](#) and the New York and New Jersey state legislatures. A Connecticut bill proposed in 2005 did not proceed to a vote.

The Consumer Healthcare Products Association, which represents cough medicine manufacturers, supports age restrictions, in conjunction with educating parents about the dangers inside their own medicine cabinets.

“You want to give parents some degree of comfort that cough medicines are not easily accessible to minors in stores,” said Andrew C. Fish, a senior vice president of the association. “Our message to parents is to be aware that some teens are abusing cough medicines, and they should be alerted to what medicines are in their houses and talk to their teens about medicine abuse.”

Thomas Meier, director of Westchester’s Drug Prevention and Stop-DWI program, said that although the county’s strategy to combat nonprescription drug abuse includes educational materials, the proposed law would further alert residents to the dangers of DXM abuse.

If the law passes, Westchester supermarkets and drugstores that sell DXM products to minors would get a warning for the first violation and \$150 fines for each subsequent offense.

Long Island’s penalties range from \$250 to \$1,000 per violation. Many merchants have tried to avoid infractions by programming cash registers to prompt cashiers to check identification when customers try to buy medicine containing DXM.

The Nassau and Suffolk bans have enjoyed broad public support, lawmakers said, especially from parents alarmed by cough medicine’s popularity as an easily accessible party drug.

“The police were noticing that in hangout areas where you see beer bottles, you would also see cough syrup containers in the woods,” said Legislator David Denenberg, who co-sponsored the Nassau County law last year. “As a parent of three minors, I couldn’t see any parent wanting CVS or supermarkets selling Robitussin or other DXM-containing syrups to my children.”

At the state level, the New York bill would permit customers under 18 to buy only one container of medication containing DXM. The New Jersey bill, introduced by Assemblywoman Mary Pat Angelini, would ban all sales to minors.

Ms. Angelini, who is also the director of Prevention First, a nonprofit substance- abuse awareness group in Monmouth County, N.J., said she had heard of cough medicine abuse increasing among young teenagers over the last five years. “We used to talk about marijuana and alcohol as gateway drugs, but this is something that truly could open the doors to other things,” she said.

Gary Vieiro said age restrictions were a good start, but he also wanted lawmakers to criminalize driving under the influence of DXM. Drivers like Mr. Shreiqein should face the same prison time as intoxicated drivers, he said.

“This was worse than drinking and driving,” his sister, Ms. Vieiro-Minozzi, said. “Drinking just puts you in a stupor. Robitussin makes you think you can fly.”

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