

New drug dealers: Medicine cabinets

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Amid the Super Bowl ads of a high-fiving dalmatian and an inflatable Charlie Brown bobbing after a bottle of Coke was the drug dealer, standing on the street and complaining about how he's lost nearly half of his customers. Kids these days, he says, are getting their kicks from their parents' medicine cabinets instead of from him. And for free.

"You got kids?" he asks. "Well, next time something goes south with your kids, don't look at me, man."

The ad, from the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy, warns about the growing abuse of prescription drugs among teens. But it's not just young people.

Nearly 7 million Americans are abusing prescription drugs, which is more than the number abusing cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, Ecstasy and inhalants combined, according to federal statistics. That's also an 80 percent increase from 2000.

"This is not an issue of dealing with drug cartels in far away places," said Jennifer DeVallance, a spokesman for the agency that ran the ad. "This is dealing with a threat that, most often, is in your home."

Efforts to stop prescription drug abuse include improving electronic medical records, requiring tamper-proof prescription pads for Medicaid patients, and creating a Minnesota health-information sharing system that allows hospitals to communicate with one another.

Prescription drug abuse in Minnesota has risen steadily with the national numbers, according to Carol Falkowski, director of the Chemical Health Division of the Minnesota Department of Human Services. She said that more than 5 million children in the country take a pill every day for behavior disorders, so "kids learn at a very young age that if you want a mood change, you take a pill."

Increasing abuse

In Minnesota, 240 people were arrested in prescription drug cases in 2006, up from 193 in 2005, according to the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. In Dakota County last month, a Farmington nurse was charged with forging her own prescriptions for Percocet after stealing prescription pads from several doctors' offices where she worked.

Theories for the increase nationwide include a public belief in the myth that prescription drugs provide a "safe" high when compared with street drugs; an increasing comfort with prescriptions as a mood-changer; direct-to-consumer advertising on the part of drug companies, and easy availability.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, prescription drugs have overtaken cocaine and heroin combined as the leading cause of lethal drug overdoses.

"Young people growing up can develop a very nonchalant attitude about pills, and think that somehow they're safer than using street drugs," Falkowski said. "What they don't realize is that taking other people's medications can be a very risky business."

Technology advances

Technology is helping address the problem. Tamper-proof prescription pads are at the heart of a new Medicaid law that takes effect in April. Doctors are required to use them for states to be reimbursed. While the law is aimed at saving money by preventing Medicaid fraud, it can also prevent patients from making copies of the prescriptions, filling them and selling the extras.

The transition to electronic medical records has also made a difference. In 2006, Minnesota hospitals spent more than \$365 million for technology development and maintenance, the vast majority of which was on electronic records, according to the Minnesota Hospital Association.

Now, hospitals can communicate electronically with pharmacies, so fewer patients ever hold a prescription in their hands. Pharmacies and hospitals communicate with insurance companies and intermediaries to track whether patients are "doctor shopping," or getting multiple prescriptions for the same health problem.

This spring, Minnesota plans to debut a new "electronic superhighway," called the Minnesota Health Information Exchange, which will allow medical organizations across the state to share information about patients who give consent.

While the focus of the system is to improve the quality of care and patient safety, preventing prescription fraud and being able to tell what prescriptions patients have filled could be a secondary benefit, according to Mike Ubl, interim executive director of the exchange.

Electronic prescriptions can also give pharmacists, who are on the lookout for fraud, some protection.

"If somebody is trying to beat the system, they're much more likely to be caught," said Joe Martin, a pharmacist with Fairview Pharmacy Services. Electronic prescriptions "give me a lot more peace of mind that the prescription is coming from the right place."

Many of the most addictive painkillers -- the ones regulated by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration -- can't be prescribed electronically, because pharmacies need to have a signed paper copy to fill them. But the federal government is even looking at changing that.

For law enforcement, prescription drug abuse is harder to catch than other kinds of drug abuse because illegal activity isn't out in the open, like selling cocaine is, said Dakota County Attorney Jim Backstrom. If police find that the prescription they suspect someone of selling has their name on it, they can't do anything.

"We're not finding that many people," he said. "We're just barely scratching the surface."