

Organizations join to thwart prescription misuse

# Combating a health quandary

By ED SCOTT

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SARASOTA COUNTY — During the first six months of last year, prescription drugs accounted for 81 percent of all drug-related deaths in Florida. The painkiller oxycodone caused most of those deaths, among prescription drugs, at 64 percent.

Efforts to curb prescription drug misuse have evolved into a three-pronged approach: prevention, law enforcement and treatment. Prevention was addressed Monday as administrators from area hospitals and four county health departments gathered at Twin Lakes Park to kick off 2011 as the “year of the Campaign for Responsible Prescriptions.”

Recognizing that healthcare professionals and pharmacy employees are on the front lines regarding prescription drug misuse, hospital chiefs and health department executives from Charlotte, Sarasota, DeSoto and Manatee counties, who are members of the Community Health Improvement Partnership (CHIP) Health Provocateur Project, signed a proclamation pledging to work together to address prescription drug misuse in the region.

The group will work together in implementing a plan to:

- Train physicians, with a focus on safe prescribing practices, local addiction resources, and law enforcement efforts, to curb misuse.
- Educate patients and staff about safe prescription drug storage. (One said flushing them was the best solution.)
- Share data.

The effort will be perpetual, starting now, but the primary focus will be on this year. “The gravity of it’

North Port, which does not have a hospital, was represented among health-care providers by Sarasota Memorial Health Care System, which operates the North Port ER, a freestanding, 24-hour emergency room off Toledo Blade Boulevard.

Participants believe additional training will help physicians identify “doctor-shopping” patients. Dr. Bill Colgate, medical director of the emergency department at SMH, who had just come off three consecutive, 12-hour night shifts at the North Port ER, says it’s “probably easy” 80 percent of the time — and “very difficult” 20 percent of the time — to judge legitimate patients from people seeking drugs for recreational use.

Meanwhile, the collaboration was lauded.

“The fact that you can have essentially the CEOs of every hospital and health department in the area come together on one issue just tells you the gravity of it,” attendee P.J. Brooks, vice president of outpatient services at First Step of Sarasota, which offers inpatient and outpatient substance abuse treatment and recovery programs, said of the officials and the problem they addressed Monday. “It’s unprecedented. I don’t know of anywhere in the country that probably can say that they are able to accomplish this.”

José Morillo, Charlotte Regional Medical Center, said his hospital welcomes the opportunity to work with other hospitals and health departments. “Our healthcare team is diligent in assessing potential prescription misuse, and works collaboratively to help mitigate these situations on a case-by-case basis,” he said.

Mary Kay Burns, acting administrator of the Charlotte County Health Department and administrator of the DeSoto County Health Department, endorsed the efforts to work together “to be sure that medication is being used for its intended purpose, for the person who truly needs it.”

One by one, administrators spoke about the problem. Many noted a sense of urgency. Sarasota County ranks eighth and Manatee County 16th in the state, regarding death rates due to unintentional poisoning. Charlotte County ranks 56th — of 67 counties — and DeSoto, 59th.

In North Port there were 13 drug-related deaths in 2010. Five other cases are awaiting toxicology reports.

“It’s a problem nationwide and North Port is not immune from it,” North Port Police Capt. Bob Estrada said. “We are working with the Sheriff’s Office on these types of cases to figure out how to stem these types of deaths.” One of the speakers Monday was Sarasota County Sheriff Tom Knight.

Asked how they would judge the success of their efforts, officials shouted out “drug-related arrests” and “physician participation in training programs.” But the most popular response regarded future reports from medical examiners about drugs found in people who die, as compiled by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

“We’ll know success if we can see a decrease in the number of deaths” related to prescription drug misuse, said CHIP Director Kari Ellingstad, who has worked on the project since May of last year. “That’s really what we are after. We all can share in that success.”

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