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Proposed 'pill mills' repeal meets opposition

By ED SCOTT

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SARASOTA COUNTY — Two years ago, a woman went to see Bill Little, administrator of the Sarasota County Health Department. She told him her 21-yearold son had died from a prescription drug overdose, and that there were other families she knew “that had experienced the same tragedy.”

She simply wanted to know “what to do” to curtail the loss of life, Little said at a Jan. 31 press conference featuring 12 area hospitals and four county health departments, where they announced their commitment to work together to address prescription drug misuse.

The elation felt last week was tempered Tuesday by news that Gov. Rick Scott proposes to repeal the law that established a prescription-drug monitoring program, PDMP, in Florida to crack down on “pill mills” supplying drug dealers and addicts who doctor-shop for narcotics.

Scott spokesman Brian Hughes said Tuesday that the electronic-monitoring program, which was signed into law by then-Gov. Charlie Crist in 2009, but has been delayed by contract challenges, may not be as effective as advocates claim. Scott also was worried it might infringe on patients' privacy, he said.

“Is that a function of government to track the activities of law-abiding people in order to track a smaller subset of criminal behavior?” Hughes asked in an interview with The Associated Press.

The PDMP records the dispensing of controlled substances. Every time a doctor prescribes a narcotic drug he could look at the database to see if that medication has been dispensed to that patient — by another physician — within 30 days. For a patient not to disclose other recent prescriptions is a violation of state law — known as “doctor shopping.”

“(It's) the primary reason these meds end up on the street for illicit use,” said Paul Sloan, president of the Florida Society of Pain Management Providers and also a Venice resident.

“The privacy issue can be resolved by passing legislation that requires law enforcement to have subpoenas before accessing the PDMP.”

Scott's proposal to repeal the law was revealed as part of his proposed budget. Reaction was fast and, in some cases, furious.

State Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, who is one of the law's primary supporters, reacted strongly to Scott's proposal, which also would eliminate the Office of Drug Control.

“It is beyond my comprehension why the governor would propose the total elimination of the two entities that have been and have the potential to be the best tools this state will have in fighting prescription drug abuse,” Fasano said in a statement.

Since 2007, substanceabuse related admissions have increased at all emergency rooms in the four-county region (Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee and Sarasota), with opioid-related admissions increasing 25 percent. In 2009, drugs caused 249 deaths — and prescription drugs were specifically identified as a cause of death 86 percent of the time in the four counties.

Dr. Rafael Miguel, medical director of the Pain Medicine Program at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, said Wednesday he has “grave concerns about the repeal of the law. I think it's a mistake. We continue having an increase in deaths and the number of drugs in the streets and in schools. It makes no sense to me.”

Miguel underscored the importance of the database to healthcare professionals at the fourcounty press conference last week at Twin Lakes Park in Sarasota.

He urged hospital administrators to direct their lobbyists to support strong.

Meanwhile, last August Charlotte County commissioners unanimously approved a six-month moratorium on any new pain-management clinics, with hopes of deflating the number of shady medical centers contributing to the area's growing prescription overdose problem. Moratoriums were recently extended in Charlotte, Manatee and Sarasota counties, Sloan said.

A Charlotte commissioner blasted the governor Wednesday.

"I am deeply disturbed by this reversal. Gov. Scott's decision is steps backwards. Local government should not bear the burden," said Charlotte County Commissioner Robert Skidmore, who has led the fight to curb prescription drug misuse in the county. "He has made a mockery of the system."

The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office has a pharmaceutical diversion investigative unit, which includes personnel from the North Port Police Department. Sheriff Tom Knight said that about 75-80 percent of the drug-related undercover tips gathered by that unit and others in the agency are about prescription drugs. "This is our crack cocaine," Knight said.

Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

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