Sharp Increase in Painkiller Sales Nationwide

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Sales of two major painkillers soared across the United States in what experts describe as an "addiction epidemic," The Associated Press (AP) reports.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), sales of oxycodone (the key ingredient in OxyContin, Percocet and Percodan) and hydrocodone (the key ingredient in Vicodin, Norco and Lortab) increased greatly between 2000 and 2010. Pharmacies sold 69 tons of oxycodone and 42 tons of hydrocodone in 2010, with sales increasing 16-fold in some places during the past decade.

In addition to relieving pain, opioid drugs such as oxycodone and hydrocodone provide potentially addictive feelings of euphoria and well-being.

The expanding use—and abuse—of these drugs starts from a real need for pain medication, combined with an increased willingness on the part of doctors to supply that need. But such broad availability breeds recreational use, especially when paired with unprincipled doctors whose "pill mills" dispense unneeded prescriptions to addicts.

DEA data based on shipping from drug distributors to doctors, hospitals, medical schools and pharmacies provide a clearer picture of the problem. While aging Americans across the country draw ever more heavily on pain medication, much of the geographical spread of painkiller addiction started in—and spread out from—specific locales.

These include West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, where coal miners suffer from back problems and other sources of chronic pain; the environs of Indianapolis, Las Vegas, Newark and St. Louis, all of which contain shipping centers for mail-order pharmacies; American Indian reservations in South Dakota, northern Minnesota and Wisconsin, and southwestern Arizona; and some areas with military bases or Veterans Affairs hospitals, which tend to soldiers injured in the Middle East.

Current methods for dealing with addiction are insufficient. As of early this year, 40 states have computer systems that track patients' prescriptions and purchases to prevent abuse, up from 20 states in 2006. But there's no federal database of this sort, and many states don't cross-check with other states, so addicts flagged by their home state's system can bypass the monitoring efforts by crossing state lines.

Experts warn that there aren't enough drug rehabilitation clinics available to treat addicts, especially in areas where painkiller addiction is just starting to spread.

To read the AP article, click here.

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