

Pain pill new drug of choice on street

It offers relief -- and a 'heroin' rush

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When law enforcement officials decry the evils of OxyContin, a painkiller gaining popularity as a recreational drug, they see the faces of people such as Alan, a former addict who chewed the drug for an immediate high and sold spare pills on the street.

When doctors tout the wonders of OxyContin, they see the faces of people such as Madeleine Thompson, who suffers from searing cancer pain that a single pill of the powerful prescription medication can drive away for long stretches of time.

OxyContin, a time-release version of the compound found in Percodan, delivers steady pain relief to people with severe or chronic pain when used properly. For a huge, heroin-like rush, abusers consume the drug after removing the pill coating.

The lure of the drug has contributed to scores of deaths in Florida alone, and sparked a mini crime wave. In the last five months, OxyContin has been stolen from five pharmacies in Broward and one in Dade. There have been 12 other break-ins involving OxyContin from St. Lucie south, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

On Friday, OxyContin manufacturer Purdue Pharma announced it would temporarily suspend shipment of the 160-mg version of the pill.

The company has announced it will spend millions of dollars to try to develop a tamper-proof version of OxyContin. The DEA and the Food and Drug Administration are discussing how to reduce the illicit use of OxyContin.

LEGITIMATE PATIENT:
OxyContin has helped patients including Madeleine Thompson.

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TO CURB ABUSE

To further curb abuse, some doctors have tightened up on prescribing OxyContin and the state has limited Medicaid reimbursement for the drug.

In the past year, oxycodone -- the primary component of OxyContin -- has been implicated in a rising number of drug overdose deaths in many states, including Florida. Oxycodone was found, often in concert with other drugs, in 52 of the 166 overdose deaths in Broward in 2000. In Miami-Dade County, oxycodone was present in 11 drug overdoses last year.

This year in Broward at least eight people have died of overdoses that included oxycodone among other drugs, but that number will likely rise once toxicology reports are completed on a backlog of overdose cases at the medical examiner's office. In Miami-Dade, 11 people have died this year also from taking oxycodone -- most likely mixed with other drugs, according to the Miami-Dade medical examiner.

Since 1999, South Florida hospitals have seen at least 221 oxycodone overdoses, about 150 of them last year. About 40 oxycodone overdoses have been identified this year, said Dr. Richard Weisman, director of the Florida Poison Information Center at the University of Miami.

BEARING THE BLAME

While OxyContin accounts for only a quarter of the prescriptions of oxycodone drugs, authorities believe this particular drug bears the blame for the increase in oxycodone deaths.

“What’s alarming from an enforcement standpoint is that there have been so many overdoses across the country,” said Joe Kilmer, a spokesman in the Miami field office of the DEA.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the federal office that tracks drug and alcohol abuse, has no hard nationwide data on oxycodone or OxyContin abuse because its illegal use has grown so quickly.

ONE POINT

For Thompson, who credits the drug with easing severe pain, the debate boils down to one point: “My only cause for concern would be if they tighten it up and make it unavailable to patients who really need it. OxyContin allows me to lead a fairly normal life.”

Last fall, the 53-year-old Fort Lauderdale woman developed debilitating abdominal pain stemming from pancreatic cancer. When not on OxyContin, she said, “you just want to crawl up in a little ball and not be touched.”

“That gave me a clue of what it would be like to be off it,” she said.

In the past, patients with her condition would have relied on short-acting drugs that created peaks and valleys of relief, said Dr. Pamela Sutton, Thompson’s physician at Broward General Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale. Pain management specialists like Sutton welcomed the arrival of OxyContin in 1995 as a medicine that would offer continuous relief to those who needed it.

“It’s a wonderful addition to the possible medicines you can give to people with moderate to severe pain,” Sutton said. “In many ways it’s changed the way pain management is done.”

While on OxyContin, Thompson can drive, run errands, meet friends for lunch. Her chemotherapy treatments often leave her exhausted but at least, she says, cancer pain has not dictated her life. Most important, perhaps, without pain sapping her stamina, she can devote herself to beating the cancer.

“It enables you to concentrate on being well and gives you the strength to fight the disease,” she said.

FORMER ADDICT

Strength is something that Alan will need in the coming months.

A former cocaine addict, Alan, who asked that his real name not be used, began taking OxyContin when a doctor prescribed it to him to reduce the pain he suffered as a side effect of HIV medications. Friends told Alan the drug would deliver a mind-blowing high if he broke through the time-release coating and consumed the opiate all at once.

“When you break the tablet, chew it or snort it, it goes into your bloodstream immediately,” he said. “It got me very hyper and it got rid of the pain.”

Eventually Alan went to another doctor, one willing to write patients prescriptions without asking questions. After a perfunctory examination, Alan said, the doctor gave him a prescription for 40 tablets. Alan wrote him a check for \$150 and promptly headed to the street to resell a good portion of the OxyContin, which can go on the street for as high as \$1 per milligram.

“That opened the door for me to return to using crack cocaine,” he said sheepishly. After about a month, Alan resolved to stop abusing the OxyContin and returned to his original doctor.

OxyContin appealed to Alan because he could snort it just as he would cocaine. It appealed to Lisa, another recovering addict who went on an OxyContin binge a few months ago, precisely because she did not have to snort or inject it.

Like Alan, Lisa identified a doctor whom she knew would not ask too many questions. The doctor never ascertained that she was already on methadone to curb a long-standing habit of abusing prescription drugs.

“It’s a business, everybody’s making money,” she said.

HORRIFIED DOCTORS

But many doctors who see OxyContin as an excellent alternative for fighting pain are horrified to learn how it might be abused.

Dr. Robert Glasser, a hematologist-oncologist at Memorial West in Pembroke Pines, said in most cases he will prescribe the drug only for patients with malignant cancer.

“I’m trying not to flood the streets,” he said. “We want to limit the supply as much as we can.”

The state’s Agency for Health Care Administration recently placed a limit on the number of OxyContin pills a Medicaid patient can receive per prescription. The cap depends on the dosage. The agency is reviewing other steps it could take to curb illicit use of the drug.