

# In Florida, Misused Prescription Drugs Are A Killer

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Prescription drug abuse poses the single greatest drug-related threat to the health and safety of Floridians since crack cocaine. The 2009 Florida Medical Examiner's Report reveals that prescription drug overdoses kill seven Floridians every single day – a tragic number five times greater than deaths from all illicit drugs combined.

Pain clinics have exploded throughout the state, many operating as illegal "pill mills" where drugs are traded for cash. The number of people in treatment due to prescription drug abuse has risen over 400 percent since 2001, drugged driving incidents have skyrocketed and law enforcement is swamped with pharmaceutical diversion cases. With no prescription monitoring system yet in place, Florida has become a favorite destination for drug-seekers along the eastern seaboard and Appalachia.

But don't be fooled. Although pill mills are the most blatant and egregious manifestation of the problem, they are not the major source of prescription drug diversion and abuse. According to the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 70% of those who use prescription drugs non-medically get their drugs from friends and family members.

Not surprisingly, patients receiving medications from a single doctor is the next most frequent source, followed by those who are "doctor shoppers" visiting multiple doctors to receive pain killers. Stolen, forged, or counterfeit prescription forms are yet another way to illegally acquire narcotics for non-medical use. Finally, pill mills and street dealers are the bottom feeders – literally -- as the sources for diverted pharmaceuticals.

So what are we doing about this? In January, Lieutenant Governor Jeff Kottkamp convened a Statewide Prescription Drug Task Force comprised of several state agencies and charged them with finding solutions. Since then, Florida law enforcement officials have stepped up their efforts. In partnership with Federal agencies, they have accelerated their crack down on the rampant criminal activity.

The Florida Department of Health has assigned some of their investigators to law enforcement task forces to investigate the clinics and physicians involved in illegal practices. This unprecedented partnership has already resulted in a number of successes across the state. Additionally, the Lieutenant Governor's task force developed an anti-pill mill legislative proposal – since passed into law (SB 2272) -- that granted greater authority for health officials to regulate pain clinics.

Perhaps our best tool for beating this problem is the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP). Set to begin operation in December, the PDMP will deter and prevent much of the illegal diversion and abuse of prescription drugs. Physicians will be able to view their patient's prescription history resulting in an improved standard of care. By using the PDMP, practitioners can avoid prescribing drugs that may cause a bad reaction when taken with drugs already prescribed by other physicians. Potential "doctor shoppers" will be deterred when physicians review a listing of their previous prescriptions.

For many, the PDMP might well be the impetus for a much-needed referral to substance abuse treatment. The system will generate reports to law enforcement of potential "doctor shoppers" and those physicians potentially colluding with patients to illegally divert prescription drugs. Although not a "silver bullet", this new system has the ability to begin putting the brakes on this runaway problem.

The DEA has reported that Florida collected 9,819 pounds (almost five tons) of unused, unneeded, and expired medications during the recent National Drug Take Back Day on Saturday, September 25<sup>th</sup>. Our thanks to all the law enforcement officers around the state who did the hard work to make this possible. We also want to thank all our community coalitions who supported this event and encouraged the tremendous turn out on Saturday across the state.

We have a long way to go to reduce prescription drug abuse in Florida, but even the farthest journey begins with a single step. Thankfully, Florida has begun taking the right steps.