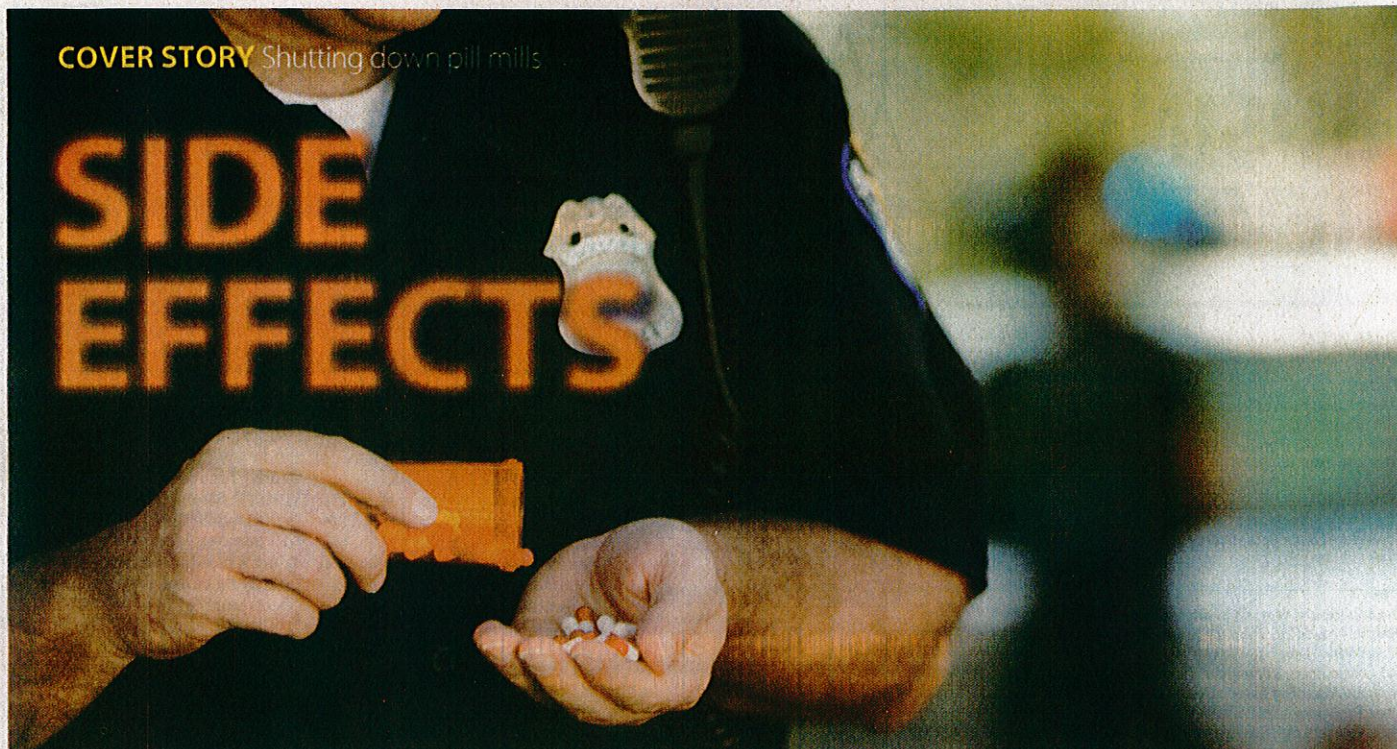


COVER STORY Shutting down pill mills

SIDE EFFECTS



After the state's prescription pill mill crackdown, pressure mounts on treatment system as addicts seek alternatives.

by John Pacenti
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Whoever said drug addiction is a victimless crime never visited St. Joseph's Women's Hospital in Tampa. Nearly one in 10 babies are born to mothers addicted to drugs, with the highest percentage dependent on the prescription painkiller oxycodone.

Neonatal abstinence syndrome is the name given to effects of drug withdrawal on newborns. Symptoms may include sensitivity to light and noise, poor feeding and poor weight gain. In addition, these infants often have incessant high-pitched crying as well as seizures and tremors. They are frequently premature.

"They have similar types of symptoms that the average drug addict would have withdrawing — only it's shocking to see them in a baby," said nurse Karen Howell, director of patient care services.

Doctors at St. Joseph's have no choice but to give the newborns morphine and wean them off opiates, taking an average of a month before sending them home, hoping for the best.

It's in the neonatal intensive care units, treatment facilities and back-alley meetings of desperation and opportunity where the war on Florida's prescription epidemic is being fought.

Pill mills that contribute to an average of seven overdose deaths a day in Florida are being driven out of business. Florida, once the nation's poster child for prescription medication abuse, is pursuing a multi-pronged approach pushed by Attorney General Pam Bondi that combines law enforcement, regulations and new laws.

How bad was it? Of an estimated 53 million oxycodone doses sold nationally in 2010, nearly 45 million were purchased in Florida. In September 2009, 33 of the nation's top 50 dispensing practitioners of oxycodone were in Broward County and 49 were in Florida.

Out-of-state addicts would hit as many pain clinics as they could before heading home. Strips along Oakland Park and Hollywood boulevards in Broward County were dotted with pain clinics nearly next door to each other. One chain of clinics allegedly was run by convicted heroin trafficker Vincent Colangelo. The Davie man is accused of unloading 770,000 pain pills in a year and pulling in \$150,000 a day. A typical visit by an addict could cost upwards of \$2,000.

"Some of these pill mills looked like Black Friday at a Wal-Mart. They had hundreds of people coming in daily from out of state. That's when you know you had a problem," said Capt. Eric Coleman, commander of the Palm Beach sheriff's narcotics division.

But since the launch of Florida's statewide drug enforcement strike force, law enforcement made 1,237 arrests, including 22 doctors, and seized 284,138 pills, 57 weapons, 45 vehicles and \$2.3 million from March to mid-October.

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder came to Tampa on Friday to address efforts to combat the illegal distribution of prescription drugs.

according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

The crackdown on prescription pill mills is one accomplishment Gov. Rick Scott, mired in poor poll numbers, can trumpet even though he initially opposed a prescription drug monitoring database.

But fighting drugs is often like swatting at flies. Closing pill mills has left a lot of desperate addicts. Law enforcement and the substance abuse recovery community say the results are a spike in petty crime, such as burglaries and car break-ins; a jump in heroin use, especially of a higher-quality product from Mexico; and full detox and treatment beds at publicly funded facilities.

"Treatment is the solution" is the cry from those who work in substance abuse recovery and agencies like the state Department of Children and Families. But will state lawmakers cough up money to treat drug addicts when they are facing a \$2 billion shortfall in the budget year starting July 1?

"Without treatment we are only going to see all of the other related problems become more severe: crime, continued illicit drug dealing, deaths and medical emergencies," said James N. Hall, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse co-sponsored by Nova Southeastern University.

Mark Fontaine, executive director of the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association, said it's imperative that more treatment is made available.

"Now that the budget got tough again, we will see what happens," he said. "But I think there is a growing understanding as you shut down the pill mills, addicted individuals are going to need access to detox and treatment."



Indigent drug abuse treatment in Florida

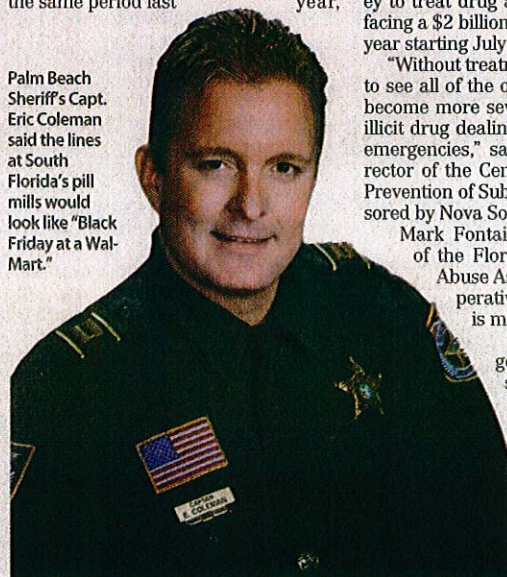
County	Need meet
Broward	11%
Hernando	13%
Hillsborough	12%
Manatee	10%
Miami-Dade	10%
Palm Beach	13%
Pasco	7%
Pinellas	12%
Sarasota	8%
Statewide	11%

Source: Department of Children and Families

RELATED PROBLEMS

New statistics indicate a 17 percent drop in oxycodone purchases by Florida's pharmacies and practitioners for the first five months of the year compared to the same period last year.

Palm Beach Sheriff's Capt. Eric Coleman said the lines at South Florida's pill mills would look like "Black Friday at a Wal-Mart."



State Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, sponsored the anti-pill mill legislation earlier this year. He said lawmakers recognize another step must be taken to provide more recovery for addicts.

"It's the trickle-down effect," he said. "Yes, we are closing down the unscrupulous pill mills and we are going after those who are essentially drug pushers, but you still have the individuals who have an addiction. Either we help them

“ Right now detox beds in Florida, as I understand it, are full as of last week. I called a half dozen providers and we are talking about anywhere from two days to a week. These are safety net providers.”

MARK FONTAINE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
FLORIDA ALCOHOL AND
DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION

or they wind up in the emergency room — and that will cost taxpayers more money.”

DIDN'T STAY SOBER

Colin B., who works in the recovery community in Boca Raton and doesn't want his last name published, migrated to Florida from Connecticut to get clean. He mostly did heroin, but when he came to South Florida, he relapsed in the sea of prescription pills.

"I didn't stay sober. I did pills. That's what was there and what was inexpensive. I chewed them, I sniffed them, and I shot them," he said. "South Florida is notorious for pain clinics. The pills in Florida have been around for a number of years. Before I got sober, they were already huge."

He worries the crackdown on prescription drug abuse will hurt those who really need the drugs for severe pain.

"It's a real tough call in that respect," he said. "I have seen a lot of people who've gone downhill with these pills, and I have seen people use them as directed and use them as pain management. They are cancer patients, people who are very sick, people who have been in these horrible accidents."

These days Colin helps other addicts, reaching out to them by phone to try get them into recovery. There are beds for those who have health insurance or can pay, but an addict at rock bottom most likely has neither. That's when publicly funded facilities come into play. Open beds at these places are very scarce right now.

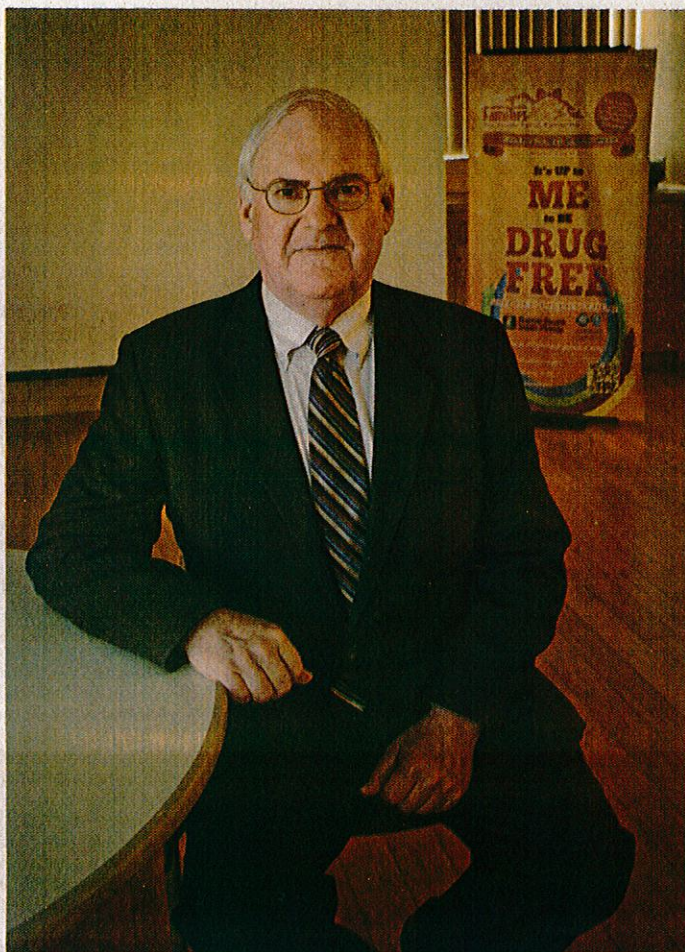
Fontaine said his organization networks with treatment facilities.

"Right now, detox beds in Florida as I understand it are full as of last week," he said. "I called a half dozen providers, and we are talking about anywhere from two days to a week [to wait for admission]. These are safety net providers."

Hall said he's hearing the same scenario.

"Everyone involved in substance treatment, particularly in Broward and the Panhandle, are being overwhelmed with demand for treatment of opiate addiction," he said.

Broward County had the most demand in South Florida for government-funded treatment last year with 1,035 admis-



J. ALBERT DIAZ

James N. Hall of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse says breaking up pill mills must be followed by treatment for addicts. Otherwise, Hall predicts more crime, illicit drug dealing, deaths and medical emergencies.

sions, according to DCF. Palm Beach had 514, and Miami-Dade had 226.

Stephenie W. Colston, the department's director of substance abuse and mental health programs, told lawmakers Oct. 6 that the state is meeting only 11

percent of the need for substance abuse treatment for the uninsured and underinsured.

"When law enforcement began to crack down on these pill mills, we began to see an increase in the demand for pre-

on the web

View James N. Hall, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse, on **DailyBusiness Review.com**

scription drug abuse treatment. It has exploded," she said.

DCF has trained investigators in Broward and Palm Beach counties to identify the difference between legitimate and illegitimate prescription drug use. They are ready with intervention protocols that link affected families with substance abuse and mental health treatment providers.

And now the state's prescription drug monitoring database has gone online allowing physicians and pharmacists to discover if a patient is doctor shopping — hopping from physician to physician for prescriptions. With a ban on drug distribution at pain clinics, addicts must take prescriptions to a pharmacy, which can alert authorities to abuse.

"The triage for this public health epidemic and crisis of prescription drug abuse is: one, save lives; two, treat addiction; and three, promote only appropriate use of medications," Hall said.

FILLING THE VOID

Without a treatment option, addicts are looking for the street equivalent of oxycodone: heroin.

"We have been concerned about that from the beginning," Hall said. "In the storm of opiate withdrawal, any narcotic port will do."

Of particular concern, Hall said, is word that Mexican traffickers have perfected their processing and are now trafficking in a purer, and deadlier, form of heroin. Usually, brown heroin doesn't move east of the Mississippi River, but it now has a void to fill created by the demise of the pill mills.

Just last Wednesday, the U.S. attorney's office charged 13 people — including nine Port Everglades workers — in a conspiracy to smuggle 44 pounds of cocaine and heroin with an estimated street value of \$2.5 million through the Broward County seaport.

Oxycodone is synthetic heroin. OxyContin is a time-release brand version. Users prefer it to other types of prescription painkillers, like Vicodin, which adds acetaminophen.

Coleman of the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office said heroin is already making its mark in his jurisdiction on trafficking routes established for cocaine and marijuana.

"We have seen a noticeable increase. Three pounds of heroin have been taken off the street," he said. "Last year, it was a minuscule amount, like an ounce."

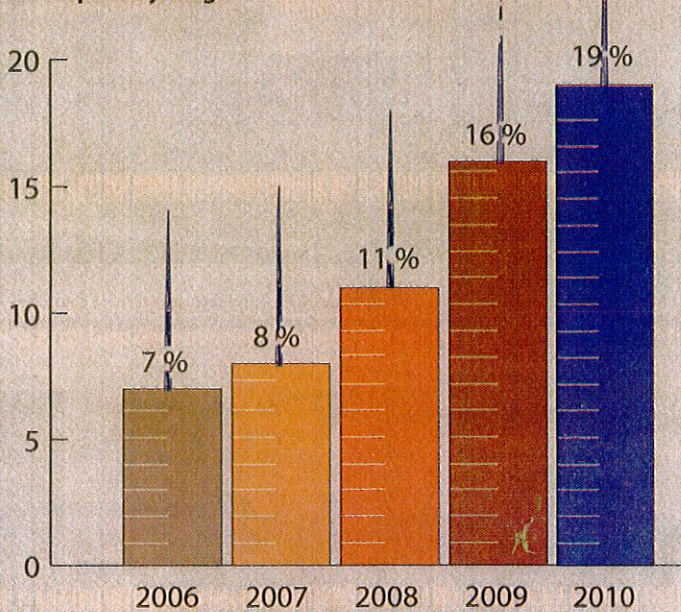
But Florida had little choice but to target pill mills first and face the fallout. The death rate from oxycodone increased 265 percent from 2003 to 2009, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. By 2009, the number of deaths from prescription drugs was four times that of street drugs.

Scott signed a law in June requiring doctors to use tamper-proof prescription pads or electronic prescriptions, toughen penalties for doctors who overprescribe painkillers and banning most doctors from dispensing the drugs. The Florida Department of Health can issue emergency suspensions of doctors' licenses.

MASS SHUTDOWNS

Florida may have been slow to ac-

Treatment admissions with prescribed opiates as the primary drug



Source: Florida Department of Children and Families

SEE COVER STORY, PAGE A10

FROM PAGE A9

COVER STORY: Bondi said taking on pill mills a top priority

knowledge its problems but may offer a guide for other states to address their own prescription drug abuse problem.

"Although we weren't first at the table, we are going to finish strong," Coleman said.

In Palm Beach County alone, the number of pain clinics have been cut from more than 100 to about 50, and dispensers are now required to register with the state. Eighteen doctors, two dentists and two pharmacists have been arrested in the county. The state has suspended the licenses of 29 doctors, Coleman said.

He is hearing from colleagues in other divisions that petty crime like car break-ins, larceny and shoplifting is on the upswing. Thieves are looking for something quick to steal and trade or sell for drugs, he said.

"Those who need to support their addiction are not able to get this product from the doctors," Coleman said. "They turn to the street, and the price has doubled. In some ways, we are going to see it get worse before it gets better."

The price of a pill has gone from \$7 to \$15 or even \$20 in South Florida. In Kentucky, one oxycodone pill can run \$30.

Earlier this month, two South Florida brothers were arrested by Deerfield Beach police for about 30 vehicle break-ins allegedly to feed their drug habits. In August, one thief hit 30 cars at three Hialeah complexes.

Danny Alexander at the Auto Glass Stop in Miami said business has been good fixing broken glass.

"There's been a lot of times I would get cars coming in from the same block," he said. "People are getting their laptops, cell phones and purses stolen."

Pharmacies also have been targeted by burglars, and police have advised owners to increase their security.

"It's a very valuable product now, and it has to be guarded," Coleman said.

One upside for Florida is the pill mill crackdown has pushed some of the problem to other states. Coleman said Georgia has seen pain clinics popping up.

"Missouri may become the next ground zero for this," he said.

It's not unusual for semi-trailer trucks filled with painkillers to disappear en route to



CANDACE WEST

State Attorney General Pam Bondi wants to establish a strike force to address neonatal withdrawal syndrome.

pharmacies.

EMERGENCY ACTION

While law enforcement targets pill mills, those in the treatment arena stress education is key to preventing another round of addicts. They stress not mixing drugs. Almost all overdoses are cocktails of alcohol, painkillers and other drugs, such as the anti-anxiety medication Xanax.

Hall would favor a bill that would prohibit someone from being prosecuted for drug possession if they call in an overdose or drive someone experiencing an overdose to the hospital.

"We see this as a real barrier as to why people don't seek help — because they think they will get in trouble," he said.

Karen H. Perry, executive director of the NOPE Task Force, which fosters drug abuse education and programs in West Palm Beach, lost her son to a prescription pill overdose in 2004. He was getting pills from a friend at college who was doc-

tor shopping. She said the emergency room often is a missed chance at intervention.

Preliminary research shows about 38 percent of fatal overdoses in Palm Beach County involve people who were hospitalized and survived a previous overdose.

"We are seeing no offer of treatment. There is no follow-up care," Perry said. "If you go to a hospital and you have a heart attack, you are going to be kept overnight, and you are going to be told you can't do certain things anymore."

But she said that doesn't happen with overdose cases.

Bondi, who quickly made pill mills her top priority, is pushing for new legislation to establish a strike force to address the growing problem of neonatal withdrawal syndrome. There is no information readily available on what will be the long-term prognosis for these children.

She visited St. Joseph's earlier this year and saw for herself the newborn addicts. A few months ago, doctors were giving infants methadone to ease them off their addiction, but that plan was abandoned in favor of a gradual reduction because there are no outpatient programs for babies like there are for adults.

"When I first took office,

stopping the prescription drug abuse that was claiming seven lives per day was my top priority," Bondi said in a statement. "As I worked toward that goal, I learned about the growing trend of infants being born addicted to prescription drugs. I will do everything in my power to better understand this problem so we can prevent it. Newborns should be given milk or formula for nourishment, not methadone for drug withdrawal."

Howell said women addicted to oxycodone are more often white women who initially were prescribed the medication for a legitimate reason. They didn't expect to become addicts, and she said they are shocked when they are told not only are they addicted, but so are their newborns.

Drug-dependent babies are most vulnerable to child abuse, Howell added.

"They are often difficult babies, jittery, irritable and cry a lot," she said. "These are the ones you hear suffer from shaken baby syndrome. Their parents often already have decreased capacity for tolerance for life stressors, and their parenting skills are not optimal."

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MELANIE BELL

Karen H. Perry of the NOPE Task Force worries there is no follow-up treatment for overdose survivors. About 38 percent of fatal overdoses in Palm Beach County involve people who were hospitalized and survived a previous overdose.

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