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Heroin, prescription drug abuse climb in NW Ohio: Part 1 of series

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staff writer

After seven years of being prescribed pain pills for a back injury, "Chris," 37, of North Baltimore, knew he had become a drug addict.

When his doctors stopped prescribing the pills, he turned to the street to get his highs. There, he even dabbled with heroin "when there was absolutely nothing else."

"Chris'" name has been changed for this article, but his story is typical of many in northwestern Ohio, according to authorities, who report heroin and prescription drug abuse have increased dramatically.

"The rise in heroin cases came from out of nowhere last year," said Findlay police Capt. Sean Young. "We went from finding glass pipes and 'stems' to finding syringes."

Glass pipes and "stems" are associated with crack cocaine use, while syringes are linked with heroin, Young said.

Forced to the streets to score drugs after prescriptions run out, addicts sometimes turn to heroin because it's cheaper.

It costs \$100 for a gram of heroin, which is good for about two or three doses, according to Findlay police Sgt. Jim Mathias. OxyContin, usually prescribed for pain, is selling illegally for about \$80 for an 80-milligram tablet, usually a single dose, he said.

These drugs are highly addictive and can be fatal.

Two Findlay men, Taylor Akerman, 19, and Aaron Grotrian, 20, died of heroin overdoses in the past year.

The drugs also have been deadly in Hardin County, according to Kenton Police Chief John Vermillion.

"In the past year, there have been a few people who have overdosed on heroin, but a few years back, about every two months, we had a heroin overdose death," Vermillion said.

Putnam County Sheriff James Beutler said, "Prescription drugs are the drug of choice right now for a variety of ages because they are deemed somewhat 'legal'" to the user.

Pain pills are easy to get and can be obtained as easily as taking them from a medicine cabinet, he said.

Opiates, which include heroin and pain pills like OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin, are being abused by people of all ages, but particularly by those in their late teens and 20s, according to police.

High school students as young as 15 are also abusing heroin and pain pills, according to drug treatment providers.

"It used to be marijuana was the gateway drug, but now it's the prescription medications that are leading people down that road," Mathias said.

Accordingly, social services are being tailored to help heroin and pain pill addicts. Methadone and Suboxone, transitional drugs used to wean people away from these drugs, are prescribed to help with addiction.

Police have joined forces to help combat increased drug use, and community leaders have launched their own task force to attack the problem.

A look at indictments in Hancock County Common Pleas Court shows the increasing opiate problem.

Last year, there were 10 people indicted for heroin offenses out of 94 drug indictments handed up. Another 28 indictments were for other opiate offenses.

"Prior to 2009, we probably had one or two heroin cases per year," said Hancock County Assistant Prosecutor Drew Wortman.

Prosecutor Mark Miller said, up until last year, there were reports of heroin in other counties, but not in Hancock County.

Sentencing drug offenders is a challenge for Hancock County Common Pleas Judges Joseph Niemeyer and Reginald Routson.

They try to separate the drug users from drug dealers, but that line is often blurred. Some users become dealers to support their habits, the judges said.

The Legislature sets parameters for judges in sentencing. In some cases, prison is mandatory and, in other cases, there is a structure that tells judges whether the crime favors prison or not, Routson said.

"Just sending everyone to prison, will that solve our problems? No," he said.

A community control sanction, often referred to as probation, is an alternative to prison and is sometimes used by the judges.

Community control can last up to five years, and can be a combination of jail time, supervision by the probation department, electronic monitoring, a work-release program, drug and alcohol counseling, education classes, or sending a person to the Western Ohio Regional Treatment and Habilitation Center in Lima.

At the center, the offender is in a locked building, but the person also pursues treatment, a high school diploma, parenting classes, and anger management courses, for example. The program typically lasts four to six months.

Another sanction is to enroll an offender in the Hancock County Adult Probation Department's program for cognitive-behavioral treatment. The program tries to alter the offender's thinking.

"It's really what the professionals in the field are telling us works," Niemeyer said.

If offenders are placed on community control, judges reserve prison time for them if they violate their sanctions.

And there is treatment in prisons, Routson said. There are programs for offenders convicted of drunken driving, community service work, education opportunities, and drug abuse treatment, according to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

"It's not just warehousing, but it is becoming more difficult to provide programming," with overcapacity in prisons and less money to work with, Routson said.

"The waiting lists are a lot longer and some opportunities are just not provided any more."

A judge can choose to release a person from prison early, which is known as "judicial release." The judge may use the Lima center or another treatment center as a "step-down" from prison to help ease a person's transition back into society.

Along the same lines is "transitional control," in which an offender, during the last six months of a prison term, can be placed in a halfway house to help with reintegration.

"Intervention in lieu of conviction" is when a judge orders the offender to enroll in a treatment center for drug or alcohol abuse and abide by other requirements. If they complete the treatment and follow the rules, the offense does not go on their record.

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