



A WGCU documentary airing this month reveals a massive, often unnoticed, drug problem

WARNING: MAY CAUSE ADDICTION

LEE COUNTY'S DEADLIEST DRUGS COME WITH PRESCRIPTIONS



BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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Southwest Florida's most notorious drugs might still be cocaine from the hills of Colombia or marijuana nurtured in a suburban grow house, but law enforcement and addiction specialists say they are most concerned now with medications prescribed to treat pain and anxiety: drugs that are synthesized by scientists, manufactured legally under federal guidelines and prescribed by doctors with years of training.

A report by The Florida Medical Examiners Commission released June 30 shows that prescription medications caused the death of 235 people in the Naples, Fort Myers and Port Charlotte area last year. That includes narcotic-based painkillers as well as medications usually used to treat anxiety. By comparison, heroin and cocaine combined caused 25 deaths.

Statewide, prescription drugs caused about three times the number of deaths (3,601) as all other drugs combined, legal or illegal, the Medical Examiners report showed.

SEE PILLS, A8 ▶



COURTESY PHOTO

WGCU editor Brian Price and reporter Rachelle Grossman view an image of a man inhaling a crushed Oxycodone pill.

Here's the buzz: Mosquitoes are out in full force

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Thinking the record-breaking cold of this past winter might have stemmed the number of pesky mosquitoes? University of Florida entomologists say think again, because mosquitoes are out in full force, and so are the diseases they carry.

While the freezes might have killed a number of wintering adult mosquitoes, the insects' eggs are capable of withstanding bad weather — which means it's as important as ever to take proper precautions against bites, said Roxanne Con-

nelly, an associate professor of medical entomology at UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

"The mosquitoes are back," Ms. Connelly said. In fact, she added, "The disease season seems to be off to an early start."

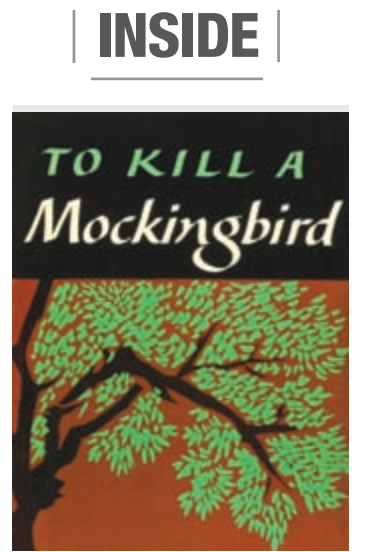
That early start includes dengue fever. As of the end of June, eight locally acquired cases had been reported in Monroe County at the southern tip of Florida this year.

Last year bore witness to the first cases of dengue contracted within Florida in more than 50 years. Although the disease

is rarely fatal, it causes high fever and severe headaches, as well as joint and muscle pain.

"We were hoping that it wouldn't be very prevalent this year, but the number of cases are starting to add up," said Coleen Fitzsimmons, a biologist with the Florida Keys Mosquito Control District, which conducts door-to-door home inspections throughout Monroe County and coordinates other large-scale control efforts, such as spray trucks.

SEE STORY, A9 ▶



Mockingbird memories

The classic Harper Lee novel is 50 years old. C1 ▶



Fourth fiestas

And other society events in Lee County. A14, C20 & 21 ▶



Avoiding calamity

Is your business ready for a hurricane? If not, we'll give you some preparation tips. B1 ▶



Bug season

Florida's annual spiny lobster season is just around the corner. A24 ▶

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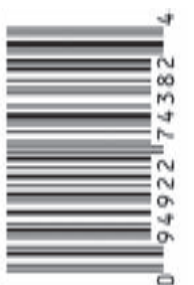
ROGER WILLIAMS A2
OPINION A4
15 MINUTES A6
BUSINESS B1

MONEY & INVESTING B3
NETWORKING B7 & 8
REAL ESTATE B11
ARTS C1

EVENTS C6 & 7
ARTS REVIEW C8
SOCIETY C20-21
CUISINE C23

when you need to know... count on first

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PILLS

From page 1

“(Prescription medication) is the number one issue for my business right now,” says Kevin Lewis, CEO of Southwest Florida Addiction Services. “If it’s not a crisis, it certainly feels like one.” Mr. Lewis says 70 percent of patients at the SWFAS detox unit are there to fight addictions to narcotic prescription medications. Ten years ago, the majority of the center’s patients were alcoholics, he adds.

These issues are at the heart of WGCU Public Media’s latest “Your Voice” program, a quarterly exploration of one topic through public television, radio and Expressions magazine. The topic this time is addiction. (See below.)

During nearly three months investigating the topic of addiction, veteran reporter and “Your Voice” creator Rachelle Grossman heard a common theme.

“As soon as we started looking into the prescription medications issue, we saw the enormity of it,” Ms. Grossman says. “They’ve kind of eclipsed any other drug that’s out there.”

“Pain, Pills & Profit” takes viewers on a fascinating and sometimes unsettling ride as reporters travel along with law enforcement on a sting operation and also delve into the personal lives and homes of painkiller addicts.

“John,” whose identity is protected, talks adamantly about the perils and horrors of addiction before crushing up his last OxyCodone tablet (a narcotic painkiller) and snorting it for the camera. Track marks are visible on his wrists — normally, he prefers to cook the crushed-up pills in a spoon and inject them.

The Medical Examiners Commission report shows the type of medication “John” is addicted to, a brand of Oxy-codone, caused more 1,185 deaths in Florida last year — that’s more any other type of drug.

“These (medications) all originate legally in the beginning,” says Rod Clarke, a writer and reporter who worked with Ms. Grossman on the documentary. “It’s unlike the old street drugs — although they turn out that way in the long run.”

Pill mills abound

Many blame a lack of regulation in Florida for breeding pain clinics known as “pill mills” that profit from prescrib-



COURTESY PHOTO

A freeze frame from the WGCU “Your Voice” television program and documentary on addiction. A Lee County sheriff’s officer arrests a person who allegedly tried to obtain prescription meds with fake MRIs.

ing painkillers or anti-anxiety meds indiscriminately. The pills can then be sold on the street.

One dealer told reporter Mr. Clarke he could sell the prescription meds on the street for about 10 times the cost of making an office visit and paying for the prescription.

“I think that the prescription drug threat is underestimated because there’s an assumption that because it’s prescribed by a doctor, it’s somehow safe,” says Deborah Comella, executive director of Drug-Free Southwest Florida. But she adds, “You can’t paint all pain medication clinics with the same brush. It’s a really complicated issue because you’ve got a lot of people who use the drugs recreationally, and a lot of people who use the drugs in a very appropriate way to get through the day.”

Mr. Lewis of SWFAS suggests the problem also stems from living in a society in which people feel entitled to medicate away pain or anxiety. “Anxiety is part of life,” he says. “Pain is something you can learn from.”

Narcotic pain medication works in the brain similarly to heroin, morphine or other opiates, but is synthetic based. Generally, the drugs change the brain chemistry to allow patients to experience more pleasure or feel less anxiety. As deeply satisfying as that may be for a time, addiction specialists say, it also dulls the healthy, larger palette of life, which includes some pain and anxiety.

One patient at SWFAS, a man in his late 20s, was prescribed a narcotic painkiller for a broken ankle nine years ago and became addicted to the feeling it gave him.

“In his case, it lit up his brain chemistry in certain ways,” Mr. Lewis says. “He’s not really sure that life includes anxiety and pain. He was legitimately frightened of all the things he’d experience once he was off his medication.”

In the majority of cases, autopsies showed that at least a few different drugs had been taken and contributed to a death, even if a narcotic prescription medication was deemed the primary cause.

Persistent problem

Reports from 2008 show prescription pain and anti-anxiety meds were already causing more deaths than other drugs in Florida — a rate that continues to climb. Until last year, 38 other states, but not Florida, had passed legislation allowing doctors and pharmacies access to general records showing if a patient had tried before to purchase pain medication.

The laws were aimed at stopping “doctor shopping” by pain pill addicts or street dealers who try to get numerous doctors in a community to write a prescription.

Florida passed similar legislation in 2009, called the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program. Mr. Lewis and others believe that could be a large step toward alleviating the abuse of prescription medication. But not all of the

\$1 million needed to put it into practice has been raised.

“It’s still unoperational,” says Paul Sloan, owner of First Choice Pain Clinic in Venice and Fort Myers. “This problem started years ago, and the legislature never would pass the PDMP bill. And then they do and they don’t fund it. This is a program that could have been up and running in a matter of weeks. It’s in effect in 38 other states. We’re not reinventing the wheel here.”

This year, Florida passed an “anti-Pill Mill” law, or Senate Bill 2272, aimed at putting illegally operating pain clinics out of business.

“A very small minority of unscrupulous people have made a cottage industry out of prescription drugs,” says Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp. “It’s certainly not an aim to put valid (pain clinics and doctors) out of business. But we have an epidemic on our hands. Seven deaths every day is not something we can ignore. We’ve got to put these unscrupulous pill mills out of business.”

“We’re trying to squeeze (pill mills) from both a law enforcement side and a regulatory side.”

The new law requires that doctors who accept cash can only dispense enough pain medication for 72 hours. It allows the Department of Health to share information with law enforcement about doctor shoppers and the potential violation of laws by health-care providers.

The Department of Health can now also revoke a pain clinic’s registration.

A press release stated that the new law “strengthens the existing Prescription Drug Monitoring Program to assist in preventing pill mills from operating in Florida as well as deterring patients from the practice of doctor shopping.”

And non-physician owners of pain clinics must now undergo background checks to register with the state.

But some say loopholes in the bill won’t be hard for addicts or street dealers to find.

“People are creative souls,” says Mr. Lewis. “They’ll find a way around it.”

The ‘wild, wild west’

In 2006 when Mr. Sloan opened First Choice Pain Clinic, there was little regulation of pain clinics. Although he isn’t a doctor, Mr. Sloan was not required by law to register his clinic or to run background checks on the doctors he employs — those things he did voluntarily.

To curb illegal activity, his clinics do not accept walk-in patients, and Mr. Sloan works with police to catch doctor shoppers. Before running his clinics, he designed house-arrest bracelets for law enforcement.

“I wanted to meet those requirements that made you better and prove to the powers that be that we weren’t ‘one of them,’” he says.

He was surprised that opening up a pain clinic was, for him, even an option. “I said, ‘Are you kidding me? I can open up a doctor’s office tomorrow and I don’t need a license or anything?’” he says. “I went home and read the statutes that night and said, ‘This is insane.’ And I did it.

“You could go open up a pain clinic in a bathroom in a bar, and a patient could sit in one stall and a doctor could sit in one stall and write prescriptions, and there (was) nothing in this state that (said) that can’t happen. That’s what’s happened in this state from day one, and that’s why it’s become the wild, wild west.”

But not everyone in the wild west of Florida pain clinics is a drug dealer, he suggests.

“There is also the mentality that if you take away the medication, the problem goes away, with one big blow,” Mr. Sloan says. “But the problem is, we’re not dealing with heroin or cocaine.

We’re dealing with a medication that is a legitimate medical treatment.”

But the line between what is necessary to prescribe and what is excessive has been crossed, says Mr. Lewis of SWFAS.

“The amount of prescriptions going out there is just huge,” he says. “It’s not even close (to what patients actually need).” ■

in the know

Deaths caused by drugs, January-December 2009

Illicit drugs total:	
Naples	3
Fort Myers	20
Port Charlotte	2
Florida	624
Cocaine:	
Naples	3
Fort Myers	12
Port Charlotte	1
Florida	529
Heroin:	
Naples	0
Fort Myers	8
Port Charlotte	1
Florida	95
Marijuana:	
Naples	0
Fort Myers	0
Port Charlotte	0
Florida	0
Prescription medication total:	
Naples	96
Fort Myers	134
Port Charlotte	5
Florida	3,601
Alprazolam (brand name: Xanax)	
Naples	7
Fort Myers	27
Port Charlotte	0
Florida	822
Diazepam (brand name: Valium)	
Naples	3
Fort Myers	13
Port Charlotte	0
Florida	248
Oxycodone (brand names: OxyContin, Oxydose and Roxicodone)	
Naples	31
Fort Myers	41
Port Charlotte	3
Florida	1,185
Hydrocodone (brand name: Vicoden)	
Naples	5
Fort Myers	11
Port Charlotte	0
Florida	265
Methadone	
Naples	21
Fort Myers	24
Port Charlotte	2
Florida	720
Morphine	
Naples	7
Fort Myers	14
Port Charlotte	0
Florida	302
Propoxyphene (brand names include Darvon or Darvocet)	
Naples	2
Fort Myers	4
Port Charlotte	0
Florida	59
Ethyl alcohol	
Local statistics not available	
Florida	559

in the know

Tune in to WGCU

>> **Television**

- **8 p.m. Thursday, July 15: “Addicted!”**
Simulcast on WGCU-FM
A panel of experts and people struggling with addiction will discuss the problem. Calls will be taken from viewers. Re-airs at 5:30 p.m. Saturday, July 17; 10:30 p.m. Sunday, July 18; and 6 p.m. Sunday, July 25.
- **8:30 p.m. Friday, July 16: “Pain, Pills & Profit”**
A documentary on the distribution, sale and exportation of prescription drugs in Southwest Florida. Re-airs at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, July 17; 11:30 p.m. Sunday, July 18; and 5:30 p.m. Sunday, July 25.

>> **Radio**

- **“Your Voice” on Gulf Coast Live!**
Airs at noon Monday-Friday, July 12-16.
- **July 12:** Legal Addictions — A live studio audience will talk about smoking, gambling, drinking and sex addictions. To join or reserve a seat, call 590-2525 or go to wgculive@gmail.com.
- **July 13:** Understanding the 12-step Program
- **July 14:** The Pharmacological Treatment of Addiction
- **July 15:** The Lois Wilson Story of Al-Anon
- **July 16:** A National Look at Addiction