

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Misuse of Prescription Painkillers Becoming More Widespread Among Young Californians

Reported/produced by: Kenny Goldberg
Publication: *California Healthline*
Date posted: April 11, 2012

Text:

I'm Kenny Goldberg with a look at the growing epidemic of prescription drug misuse among young people in California. This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation.

On Oct. 9th, 2005, Aaron Rubin went to a party at a friend's house in a San Diego suburb. During the party, the 23-year-old took a handful of OxyContin and drank alcohol.

Rubin's mother, Sherrie, says he was found unconscious the next morning.

(Sherrie Rubin): "Aaron's heart stopped, and no oxygen was getting to his brain. And then he had a heart attack, two strokes, front and back, both sides of his brain; only one-quarter of his brain was unaffected. And by the time we got to the hospital, they said to his father and I, I'm sorry, you're going to lose your son today."

Somehow, Aaron Rubin survived. Today, he's a quadriplegic and can't speak. He requires 24-hour care.

Prescription drug misuse has reached epidemic proportions. CDC says that in 2008, prescription opioids were linked to 14,800 deaths nationwide. In some communities, including San Diego, prescription drug overdoses have surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of accidental death.

Tom Lenox is a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration in San Diego. He says prescription painkillers are causing the most problems.

(Lenox): "Those are the oxycodone-based drugs, the hydrocodone-based drugs. And we're also seeing a huge problem with the benzodiazepine drugs, the anti-anxiety, anti-depressant type drugs, the Xanax, Lorazepam."

Lenox says for years, the prescription drug of choice on the street was OxyContin in 80-milligram pills. He decided to track how many of these pills were being distributed to San Diego pharmacies.

In 2007, local pharmacies purchased about 675,000 tablets.

(Lenox): "In 2008, that number increased to almost 1.1 million, an increase of approximately half-a-million pills. In one year."

Robert Wailes is an Encinitas physician who specializes in pain management and a member of the board of trustees for the California Medical Association.

(Wailes): "The bottom line is these medications are very useful in the right context and in the right situation and in the right hands."

But Wailes admits in the wrong hands, these drugs can be extremely dangerous.

That's why he employs a number of safeguards.

Wailes uses a statewide prescription drug tracking database called the Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System -- or CURES -- to see if patients are doctor shopping for narcotics. He also frequently checks patients' urine to see if they're taking the drugs that he prescribes.

But not every doctor who prescribes narcotics is as conscientious as Wailes. And not every patient who receives such medications uses them appropriately. CDC says over the last 15 years, there's been more than a ten-fold increase in the number of prescriptions written for opioids. And during the last five years in California, the number of people in publicly funded treatment programs for OxyContin addiction has nearly doubled.

Michael Plopper is the chief medical officer of Sharp HealthCare Behavioral Health Services, San Diego's largest private treatment provider for drug misuse. He says nearly half of his patients, including a large number of seniors, are addicted to narcotics.

Plopper says the problem really began in the 1990s. That's when there was a major push to encourage doctors to do a better job of treating pain. Plopper says most doctors still don't know what they're doing.

(Plopper): "Physicians really aren't adequately educated to prescribe these medications. There's generally little education in medical schools. In the past decade, we have required pain medicine education for doctors in California, but so far, that hasn't resulted in better prescribing generally. It's just made more people feel expert to prescribe more medications."

As a result, more of these drugs are ending up in people's medicine cabinets. And through drug sharing, theft and illegal sales, more narcotics are showing up on the street.

DEA's Tom Lenox says parents need to realize prescription drug misuse can start in their own home.

(Lenox): "Every day people get prescribed pills for a legitimate need, they may not take 'em all, and they sit in their house, in a medicine cabinet, in a kitchen cabinet somewhere. And high school kids, middle school kids, they get curious. The next thing you know, they're taking these pills to get high, and the next thing you know, they're getting addicted."

Since her son Aaron's overdose, Sherrie Rubin has started a not-for-profit organization called HOPE. That stands for Heroin, OxyContin, Prescription Pill, Alcohol and Drug Education.

Rubin does presentations at high schools and civic groups. She wishes she had known about the dangers of prescription painkillers before Aaron got hurt.

(Rubin): "I don't really call it a mistake that I didn't know that he was using, because there wasn't anyone talking about it. I didn't know about it. And that's what I'm trying to do, is try to save these families the heartache and tragedy that we live with daily, and their children, the life, and the challenges that Aaron has to live with daily."

Federal health officials say the misuse of prescription opioids is America's fastest growing drug problem.

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org.

I'm Kenny Goldberg, thanks for listening.