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The fight against OxyContin abuse

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Black Hills High School graduate Samantha Studebaker, 22, became addicted to OxyContin two years ago, after a co-worker's offer of a quick - and free - fix for her headache while she worked a shift at the Tumwater Costco.

Soon, Studebaker says, she was paying up to \$40 or \$80 a pill — \$1 a milligram — to that same co-worker to feed her addiction to the painkiller. At first, Studebaker used her credit cards to pay for the pills.

Then she began stealing.

In September, Studebaker was caught after embezzling more than \$32,000 from Costco over about five months to pay for the OxyContin pills that her co-worker sold at increasingly high prices. Studebaker, who worked in Costco's returns department, said she entered fraudulent returns for items, then pocketed the cash.

Studebaker's story is part of a nationwide epidemic of prescription-drug abuse. In the late 1990s, OxyContin abuse ravaged communities in the East, particularly in New England and parts of the South, where it earned the name "hillbilly heroin."

In the Northwest, including Thurston County, OxyContin addiction fuels both property crime and violent crime. In 2008, the Thurston County Narcotics Task Force seized about 700 OxyContin tablets that had been diverted for illegal use, said task force commander Lt. Loreli Thompson.

Studebaker said she had never been in trouble with the law before her September arrest, and she wouldn't have started stealing if not for her addiction.

She said her co-worker had a prescription for OxyContin but didn't need the medication.

"She had a neck injury and kept telling her doctor that she needed more, but she was OK," Studebaker said. Then, "she stopped taking them and just started selling them all to me."

Tumwater police confirmed that Studebaker's former co-worker was investigated for selling the OxyContin, but the Thurston County Prosecutor's Office declined to prosecute the case.

Studebaker said that at the height of her addiction, she was taking up to eight or nine 80-milligram OxyContin pills a day.

"They're so addictive," she said during an interview behind the glass at the visitor's room at the Thurston County Jail before she was shipped off to the women's prison in Purdy. "... If I'm paying forty and eighty dollars a pill, you better believe I'm addicted."

Studebaker is serving a one-year prison sentence at the Women's Correctional Center after her November conviction on numerous counts of theft. She hopes to turn her life around after she serves her sentence.

"My life was really good," said Studebaker of her world before OxyContin. "I had no problems, and it basically destroyed everything in my life."

"I know of more unreported violent crimes associated with OxyContin than any other illegal drug," drug task force detective Matt Renschler said.

The violent crimes are unreported because people who are robbed or victimized because of their involvement in the OxyContin trade usually won't cooperate with police, he said. And because OxyContin is so expensive and addictive, addicts frequently turn to heroin when they can't get OxyContin because it's cheaper and gives a similar high, Renschler said.

OxyContin's link to other criminal investigations in and around Thurston County over the past year points to its growing popularity and its dangers.

- **An Olympia man** whose September slaying is under investigation by Thurston County sheriff's detectives had a prescription for OxyContin, but detectives were not able to locate the pills, which belonged to Doctor "Junior" Scott, 25. Scott was found dead of a gunshot wound on Nisqually reservation land Sept. 16, said Thurston County Chief Criminal Deputy James Chamberlain.

Chamberlain said in a recent interview that detectives don't know whether Scott's OxyContin was stolen during the slaying. Scott had OxyContin in his system at the time of his death, but not enough to account for the pills that were missing when he was found dead, Chamberlain said.

The only suspect in Scott's unsolved slaying, Riley Russell, committed suicide by gunshot on the morning of Sept. 12 as an Olympia police officer approached him in his car at the Wendy's parking lot on Olympia's west side.

Russell has been named as a suspect in Scott's slaying because the two were together the last time Scott was seen alive. Also, police found a large bloodstain in Russell's vehicle, and the blood belonged to Scott, Chamberlain said. Scott's wallet and cash were missing when he

was found dead, but Scott's cell phone was located in Russell's car. The bullet that killed Scott was consistent with the firearm Russell used to commit suicide, Chamberlain added. The case is under investigation, and detectives are waiting for the results of more forensic tests, Chamberlain said.

- **In August**, a former deputy director of the State Department of Labor and Industries, James Lorne Sanford, 41, pleaded guilty to selling prescription OxyContin and Vicodin to a 16-year-old girl. Sanford was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. At the time of his November 2007 arrest, he "was using eighty milligrams of OxyContin three times daily and sixty milligrams of Vicodin at the same time," court papers state. Sanford, who had a prescription for the medications to treat back pain, gave them to the 16-year-old girl, a friend of his daughter, so she could sell them at school and they could split the profits. During Sanford's sentencing hearing, the girl's father said he blames Sanford for getting his daughter hooked on OxyContin, and that she has since been in drug rehabilitation multiple times to try to beat the addiction.

- **On Nov. 3 in Toledo**, two Rochester men with loaded firearms robbed the Toledo Pharmacy during business hours to steal OxyContin. Pharmacy owner Bill Caldwell said it was "the first time we've ever been confronted face to face with a robber, especially with guns." Toledo Police Chief John Brockmueller said the suspects had loaded firearms, were wearing ski masks during the robbery and forced employees to their knees in a back room. Brockmueller said the suspects said after their arrests that they needed the OxyContin to feed their addictions.

"I didn't realize it was such an addictive drug," Brockmueller said.

Jonathan Meyer, an attorney for Kristopher Douglas Smith, one of the young men involved in the robbery, confirmed that OxyContin addiction was the motive for the robbery. Smith has been sentenced to one year in prison after pleading guilty to second-degree robbery.

Challenges for law enforcement

OxyContin abuse is a difficult issue for authorities to deal with because the medication is legally prescribed to medical patients with legitimate reasons to take it; doctors commonly prescribe it to cancer patients and those who suffer from chronic pain.

But addicts and dealers can get an OxyContin supply simply by raiding a relative's medicine cabinet.

They also can forge prescriptions or otherwise fraudulently obtain a prescription by faking symptoms in a hospital emergency room.

"It's so hard for us to address because they can get it from legitimate sources sometimes," Thompson said. "The big problem with the pharmaceuticals is kids get in their parents' medicine cabinets."

Pain-reliever use in Washington

Washington has one of the highest rates of nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers in the nation, according to a study by the state Department of Social and Health Services that was released in September. According to the study, Washington ranks sixth among the states in nonmedical use of pain relievers by people 12 and older, after Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia. The study notes that most of the pain relievers being abused are opioids — the family of drugs that includes OxyContin.

"We've pushed methamphetamine production east, and Oxy has moved this way up from the South and the East," Thompson said.

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