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Prescription abuse must be stopped

A recovering alcoholic said he was shocked at the number of young adults he encountered at a chemical dependency clinic he attended after a relapse.

"You see all of these young people in there and wonder how did they end up here at such a young age," the man said. "Then you find out that 90 percent of the ones under 35 are there for one addiction — OxyContin. It's an absolute plague — a horrible, horrible plague."

When this state was ravaged by methamphetamine addiction, the Legislature reacted quickly with laws to limit the source of chemicals to make the illegal drug. Legislative leadership and strong enforcement are credited with turning the corner on meth and greatly reducing its supply and abuse in Washington state.

So why are lawmakers so blind to the plague of OxyContin use? Is it because it's a legal pharmaceutical? Is it benign neglect? Is it because lawmakers fear the pharmaceutical industry lobbyists or stepping between the doctors and their patients?

There are no good excuses.

The dangers of OxyContin and the lack of funding to combat abuse, were spelled out in a series of stories by Olympian reporter Jeremy Pawloski.

In his report, Pawloski notes that two years ago lawmakers passed a law to create a statewide database that would help doctors and law enforcement agencies track prescriptions for controlled substances issued to anyone in the state. The program was designed to curb abuse of controlled substances — such as OxyContin — that are legally prescribed.

The database idea would catch abusers such as the patient who fills 300 prescriptions by 12 different prescribers that are filled at 22 different pharmacies.

A database is a legislative fix that will work. It works in other states, is relatively inexpensive and could spare the public from the criminal activity of addicts who rob and steal to support their habit.

Yet, incredibly, lawmakers have not allocated any money to create the controlled substances database. As a result, addicts can continue to abuse the system, fill their prescriptions and victimize the public.

It's not right. Lawmakers meeting in Olympia need to find the money to create the database.

Doctor shopping

Steven Saxe, director of health professions and facilities for the state Department of Public Health, said the database would allow doctors to determine whether a patient was "doctor shopping" — obtaining controlled substances from multiple prescribers.

OxyContin abuse is mounting around the country, and the manufacturer certainly hasn't helped matters. The narcotic pain reliever is manufactured by Purdue Pharma of Stamford, Conn. In May 2007, company officials were fined \$634 million for making claims that the drug is less addictive and less subject to abuse than other pain medications. The fine came just two days after the company paid 26 states a total of \$19.5 million to settle complaints it encouraged physicians to overprescribe OxyContin.

And therein lies the wisdom behind the database. It gets to the source of the problem by providing the dispensers of prescriptions with "real time" information on a patient's prescription history. If a patient is doctor shopping or using multiple pharmacies to feed an addiction, the database would reveal those facts.

Information in the database would be available to law enforcement officers and prosecutors, provided that they were "engaged in a bona fide specific investigation involving a designated person," according to the 2007 legislation.

Despite the wisdom of the database program, the \$680,000 to develop the database has never been appropriated by lawmakers. The money was not included in Gov. Chris Gregoire's 2009-11 budget request.

That borders on criminal given the ruined lives and crime that will be committed because of OxyContin and other pain killer addictions over the intervening two years.

Following the leaders

Washington is not chartering a new course. Twenty-nine states have prescription drug monitoring programs in place. Pleading poverty in this state is not a legitimate excuse.

Thurston County Sheriff Dan Kimball said prescription drug abuse, especially OxyContin, was a topic of concern at the Meth Task Force meetings two years ago. "We could see it coming," Kimball said. "We saw it with the drug unit, in the jail, at juvie, heard concerns from the treatment providers and through public health officials. Everybody was seeing it, especially with young people. It's with us now and it's only going to get worse."

Kimball said the community's fight against meth has been largely successful because there was a "coordinated and cohesive approach to solve the problem."

That's precisely what's needed with the misuse and abuse of OxyContin. It starts with the Legislature finding the money to create the controlled substance database.