



The Prescription Plague: Spreading Throughout Pinellas

By Leah Harari

With Pinellas County leading the pack for prescription drug deaths in the state of Florida, the NOPE (Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education) Task Force communed at 6:00 p.m. on September 30th at Largo High School to discuss the hidden dangers behind the vague issue of prescription drug overdose.

The first speaker, Captain Robert Alfonso, an employee of the Narcotics Division of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, gave insight into the legal aspects of this, often times, hidden issue. In Pinellas County in 2009, 249 deaths by drug-related overdose occurred; 179 of which were by prescription pain meds. This ever-increasing number places drug-related deaths above homicides, suicides, and vehicular fatalities. This averages out to one death every 35.1 hours, 4.7 deaths every week, and 20-75 deaths monthly. Alfonso shared that there hadn't been a drug issue of this severity since the widespread use of crack cocaine in the late 1980's and 1990's. With the number of unintentional deaths by drug poisoning, once resting at barely 6,000 in 1990 and now at the rate of over 27,000 in 2007, Pinellas County enacted "Operation Medicine Cabinet," a life-saving venture that led to the collection of upwards of 800 pounds of prescription pills. As surveys reveal, 25% of teens admitted to misusing prescription painkillers. Alfonso urges members of the community to dispose of their unused pills by placing them with vegetable peelings in a clear bag before taking them out for the morning trash, a method that won't harm the environment.

The proceeding speaker included Robert Morelli, an M.D. and pediatric specialist for 31 years, who spoke of the rapidly growing enablers of the prescription medication epidemic, "pill mills." These illegal pain clinics (Morelli recommends checking with the medical board to determine legitimacy), 40 of which rest in Pinellas, dish out enormous quantities of these medications, an issue that had the county place a moratorium on the addition of any new pain clinics within the next two years. The speedy growth of these faux medical operations also led to signed statewide legislation to further regulate these businesses, effective this month. Opiate drugs such as Morphine, Oxycodone, and Methadone; and sedative drugs such as Valium, Ativan, and Klonopin; rule these diversion drug addictions. Legal drugs, which become diverted for illegal uses, are also used in conjunction with another common household substance, alcohol. As Morelli explained, this lethal combination creates the phenomenon of potentiation, as different substances combine in disproportionate and, often times, unknown, varying strengths.

The final presenter, Laurie Serra, founder of the NOPE Pinellas chapter, tearfully spoke of her son's untimely death by unintentional drug poisoning. Matthew Serra, a fearless, state-ranked freestyle swimmer and Virginia Military Institute graduate, died in his Largo apartment with a combination of Oxycodone, Methadone, and Xanax found in his system. After a back injury Matthew found himself addicted to the medications he had been prescribed, an addiction that led to his death. Serra went on to explain that 38 states have a drug-monitoring program in place, Florida being one of the few without. While a program for the state recently passed, this law will most likely never go into effect due to funding issues.

What are some ways to prevent this prescription plague from spreading? Speak with young adults and teens before there is a problem; lock medicine cabinets; keep a pill inventory. As Serra stated, "If there is one thing parents should take away from this meeting it is to continually speak with children about what's occurring in the community, share stores, get involved, be proactive."

For more information on the NOPE Task Force, visit www.nopetaskforce.org, email NOPE.pinellas@gmail.com, or call Laurie Serra at (727) 424-6906.