

# The Columbus Dispatch

## Ohio State conference takes on prescription-drug abuse in college

Encarnacion Pyle

When students go off to college, they often find themselves overwhelmed by demands and temptations.

Increasingly, students are coping by turning to prescription drugs, including stimulants, sedatives and painkillers, said Kenneth M. Hale, an assistant dean at Ohio State University's College of Pharmacy. Roughly one in four college-age students has illegally used prescription drugs, according to a national survey. And many more have been offered prescription pills to boost their mood, reduce stress or help them stay up all night to write papers or cram for tests.

Ohio State hopes to quash what Hale calls a growing epidemic by hosting a two-day conference that starts on Wednesday. More than 100 people from 27 campuses, including about a dozen from Ohio, have signed up to develop strategies to take back to their schools.

"We know that prescription-drug abuse exceeds that for all illicit street drugs combined, except marijuana. We also know that about 100 Americans die every day from unintentional drug overdoses," Hale said. Because the average age for starting prescription-drug abuse is around 21, he said, it is critical that the nation's schools do more in terms of prevention.

Despite those statistics, many teens still believe that prescription drugs are non-addictive and safer than street drugs, Hale said.

Prescription meds also are often easier to get than cocaine, heroin and other illicit drugs because they are sitting in family medicine cabinets, unused and unsecured.

Karen Perry's son Richie, a 21-year-old college student who loved to make people laugh and dreamed of becoming a pro golfer, died of an accidental drug overdose of prescription and other drugs in 2003. "Like most parents, my husband and I were aware that drugs were a danger to our youth," said Perry, who lives in a small village in Florida's Palm Beach County. "But like most parents, we never expected to lose our beloved son forever to a drug overdose."

She said her son started smoking marijuana at age 15. He later tried his friend's attention-deficit medication.

By college, he was drinking and using several kinds of prescription drugs, which eventually led to heroin, because it was cheaper than prescription painkillers such as OxyContin and had a quicker high. It wasn't until he came home for Christmas break during his sophomore year that she and her husband, Richard, learned that he had been using drugs since high school.

They got him into treatment, and he was sober for about a year before he relapsed. He died a month later, on June 28, 2003.

When Perry visited the home of the 21-year-old friend with whom Richie had lived for a few weeks before his death, she was horrified to find dozens of bottles of OxyContin and other prescription opioids on his dresser.

To help spare other parents the pain of losing a child, the Perrys started a nonprofit group called Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education in 2004. The group makes presentations to more than 100,000 middle-school, high-school and college students each year and holds forums for parents and others.

Perry will share her personal story at the Ohio State conference.

Three years ago, OSU's College of Pharmacy and the Cardinal Health Foundation teamed up to create the "GenerationRx" initiative. The public-awareness campaign is built around tool kits aimed at educating parents, teachers and teens nationwide about the dangers of prescription-drug abuse. The two groups are rolling out their fourth tool kit — created by OSU students for other college students — at the conference.

"It's much easier to stop the problem before it starts, which is why we're so focused on prevention," said Jessica Lineberger, senior grants manager at the Cardinal Health Foundation.

That's why, in addition to developing the take-home strategies, conference participants will be able to apply for a limited number of mini-grants worth up to \$2,500 to implement their plans. Since 2009, Cardinal Health has devoted \$4 million, including \$500,000 to three Ohio State programs, to combat prescription-drug abuse.

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