

Hospital Overdose Statistics Show a Need for Reform

Hospital visitation caused by prescription drug abuse is skyrocketing, new research shows. NOPE Task Force looks at urging legislators to require hospitals to do more to help overdose patients.

By Leon Fooksman



In the halls of Washington, in the offices of researchers, and in the living rooms and kitchens of ordinary families across the country, concerns are growing about the dramatic spike in hospital visits caused by abuse of prescription drugs.

Dr. Jeffrey H. Coben, director of the Injury Control Research Center at the West Virginia University School of Medicine, told *HealthyDay*, "We're seeing a tremendous increase in serious overdoses associated with the use of prescription drugs."

Coben is the lead author of a new study: hospitalization caused by unintentional overdose of opioids (such as Vicodin and Percocet) and sedatives (such as Valium and Ativan) jumped 37% between 1999 and 2006, and intentional overdoses of these drugs skyrocketed by 130% in that time.

The findings published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* show the need for hospitals to do more for patients with serious drug problems, said Karen Perry, executive director of NOPE (Narcotic Overdose Prevention and Education) Task Force. The Florida-based nonprofit educates students about the dangers of drugs and advocates for legislation to reduce pharmaceutical abuse.



Emergency room physicians can have a significant impact on drug-dependent patients, Perry said. Too often, though, doctors let these patients walk out of hospitals, just hours after overdosing, with a little more than a stern warning.

As a result, Perry said, NOPE is looking to encourage legislators to create a law in Florida that would require anyone brought into a hospital with drug overdose be compelled to participate in a substance abuse assessment by a licensed service provider.

She said NOPE also wants to see legislators mandate that emergency room attending physicians make every reasonable effort to contact and notify patients' next of kin, even if patients don't want their families knowing about their drug use. The law would target patients who are of traditional college age (18-24).

These proposals are personal for Perry whose 21-year-old son, Richard, died of a drug overdose in 2003 -- a month after he was admitted to a hospital and survived for another overdose. He never told his parents about the initial overdose and neither did the hospital, police and other emergency officials. To this day, she believes Richard would still be alive if she had known about the first overdose.



In southern Florida, where NOPE was founded and Richard grew up, young adults account for a significant share of people admitted into hospitals for illicit drugs and non-medical use of pharmaceuticals. Those aged 18-24 represented nearly 20 percent of the 18,300 people who went to hospitals for drug-related treatment in Palm Beach and Broward counties in 2008, according to data from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

To Perry and other NOPE supporters, the hospital statistics show a need to reform the way emergency rooms deal with overdose patients. Providing additional help for these patients at a time of great need will give them a fighting chance to overcome their illness and addiction, Perry said.

If you value NOPE Task Force's commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a voluntary payment to support the organization. Donate at www.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp

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