

# Experts: Rise in heroin deaths is worrisome

**In Florida, there are signs of growing heroin use as an alternative to opiate pills, which are becoming harder and more expensive to get.**

BY MEREDITH RUTLAND  
Special to The Miami Herald

Every time her son, Tod, relapsed, Maureen Barrett sat with him all day at a rehab facility, hoping she could save him.

Tod died last spring, after years of abusing opiates — everything from heroin to oxycodone. His death left Barrett, of Davie, to mourn a third loss to drugs.

Years earlier, Palm Beach County resident Karen Perry sent her son off to college, not knowing he'd gotten hooked first on oxycodone, and then something cheaper and stronger: heroin.

"At some point, it became expensive to buy prescription pills, so he started buying heroin," she said, reflecting on her son's fatal overdose.

Following a statewide war against prescription drug abuse, there are early signs of growing heroin use as an alternative to opiate pills, which are becoming harder and more expensive to get.

In an analysis of drug-related deaths for 2011, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement flagged heroin as one of the year's most harmful drugs. Heroin deaths statewide increased by 18.8 percent to 62.

Fifteen of those heroin-related deaths happened in Miami — the second-highest number in the state, according to the FDLE report. Orlando was the first with 18 deaths. Fort Lauderdale had three.

Historically, heroin deaths statewide are lower than they have been in the past two decades. Deaths from the drug have been declining since a high of roughly 270 in 2001, according to FDLE data.

Still, experts say the recent increase is worrisome. Miami-Dade drug rehabilitation experts said they have seen a small but definite increase in patients who have switched from oxycodone or other prescription drugs to heroin within the past year.



C.W. GRIFFIN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**BEREAVED MOM:** Maureen Barrett of Davie lost two sons and a daughter-in-law to drug overdoses.

"When I ask my patients, they say, 'Yeah, I couldn't get oxycodone, and now I'm using heroin, four or five bags,'" said Dr. Patricia Junquera, a University of Miami assistant professor of psychiatry and a doctor at Jackson Memorial Hospital's detox unit. "I think more people are switching to heroin."

The change could mean big problems for Miami-Dade, which some doctors say is desperately lacking in detoxification facilities for the rich and poor alike.

There are only a handful of facilities in Miami-Dade County that provide detox services, both inpatient and outpatient, said Dr. Juan Oms, medical director of Miami Outpatient Detox, and the need is growing.

The trend is the result of changes to state law and crackdowns by law enforcement in recent years, in an effort to rid South Florida of its status as the pill-mill capital of America.

After the Florida Legislature realized the state was the focal point of a national prescription drug abuse epidemic, Gov. Rick Scott signed HB 7095 in June 2011, which put strict restrictions on prescription drug distribution.

The bill drastically cut back on who could dispense narcotics and expanded penalties for pill-mill operators.

If Florida was the focus of the pill-mill problem, Broward Coun-

ty was epicenter.

In 2007, the county had four pill mills. By 2009, that count had jumped to 130, Broward Sheriff Al Lamberti said. BSO mounted an effort to get rid of the pill mills, and three years later there were about 50 left, Lamberti said.

With some suppliers run out of business and laws preventing new mills from opening up, the price of pills jumped. Oms said the price of 30 milligrams of oxycodone jumped from about \$10 to about \$30 in 2012.

Some types of heroin are as cheap as \$10 a hit, and addicts are going to pick the cheaper option without worrying about the painful detox process, said John Schmidt, founder of the Miami-based drug rehabilitation clinic Marvin's Corner.

Schmidt said he has seen a steadily increasing stream of heroin addicts at his center. He expects the problem, growing slowly now, to "avalanche" into a large-scale drug problem much like the nationwide prescription drug abuse epidemic.

For Barrett, she hopes people will take notice so addicts can get help before it's too late, as it was for her two sons and daughter-in-law.

"The need for help for the addicts, in terms of detox and recovery, has just risen tremendously, and of course we don't have the funds," she said.

# Board changes naming rules

**Going forward, if a school is to be named after a person, that person must be dead for at least two years.**

BY SCOTT TRAVIS  
Sun Sentinel

If you want a Broward County public school named in your honor, you'll now have to meet some strict criteria — and you won't be around to see it happen.

A School Board policy passed in December says schools can still be named after civic or education leaders of "local, state, national or international prominence," but the honoree must be dead for at least two years. The policy affects district-run schools, not charter schools.

Buildings within schools, such as libraries, theaters, and stadiums, can still be named after living people, but not district employees, School Board members, or other elected officials. The honorees must be out of public office or off the district payroll for at least two years. They can be named after donors who are still alive.

The naming policy is the latest change the School Board has made in response to a scathing 2011 grand-jury report, which accused the district of favoritism, corruption, and mismanagement.

"I think the policy helps eliminate any appearance of impropriety, let alone actual improprieties," School Board member Katie Leach said.

The new policy also gives the superintendent and School Board the right to rename a school if the honoree fails to maintain good character.

"What if a senator does something wrong? There's been no way to un-name these," board member Nora Rupert said.

She noted the controversy at Penn State, where a statue of football coach Joe Paterno was removed after a report said he had helped conceal allegations of child abuse by former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky.

Broward County has had sever-