

People Addicted To Drugs Suffer When Hospitals Don't Report Overdoses to Their Families

By Leon Fooksman

Richard Perry, an ambitious Florida college student, died on June 28, 2003 of an "accidental" overdose.

If his death wasn't devastating enough for his parents, they were astounded to learn that he was treated and released from an Orlando hospital a month earlier for overdosing on prescribed medications and heroin.



Richard Perry Jr, with mother Karen Perry

None of the paramedics, emergency room doctors or police who helped him contacted his family, his psychologist or his regular doctor to let them know he was found unconscious and unresponsive, his family says. They let him walk out of the emergency room hours later with instructions to "stop drug abuse" and to "return to the ER with any concern." He was diagnosed with depression, not addiction or heavy drug use.

"I am convinced that had my son been fully detoxed and been given the opportunity for treatment, and if we had been notified of this (first overdose) incident, he would be alive today or would have, at the very least, stood a fighting chance for his life," his mother, Karen Perry, said.

Karen Perry, now the executive director of NOPE Task Force, is working with leading drug-control advocates in pushing hospitals to do more for patients with serious drug problems at a time when drug-related deaths are spiking across the nation.

Narcotic Overdose Prevention and Education (NOPE) Task Force is proposing legislation in Florida that requires anyone brought into a hospital as a result of a life-threatening drug overdose be compelled to participate in a substance abuse assessment by a licensed service provider.

The Florida-based nonprofit also wants the same law to 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 overdoses. The law would target patients who are of traditional college age (18-24).



Dr. A. Thomas McLellan



Director Bruce Grant

The ideas are supported by Dr. A. Thomas McLellan, deputy director and senior scientist at White House Office of National Drug Control, and by Bruce Grant, director of Florida Office of Drug Control.

"Medical facilities are where a disproportionate number of substance abuse problems are served," Dr. McLellan said. "These are opportune moments for healthcare professionals to intervene."

Grant said physicians and other staff at doctor's offices, county health departments, and clinics should also be required to help diagnose and urge treatment for people addicted to drugs. He also supports requiring all physicians in Florida to undergo training in recognizing signs of drug abuse.

NOPE Task Force members have been speaking with Florida lawmaker, Rep. Mark Pafford, a Democrat representing the West Palm Beach area, about sponsoring the legislation within the next year.

"What NOPE is concerned about is common sense," Pafford said. "As a parent, I'd want to know if my child was on drugs."

Drug addiction is a widespread problem. In Florida, about 8,000 people died of causes related to drugs in 2007, according to Florida Medical Examiner's Interim Report 2008. In Palm Beach County alone, where Richard Perry grew up, 300 people died of drug overdoses in 2007 -- and nearly 35 percent of the victims were treated in emergency rooms prior to their overdoses, Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office reported.

To this day, Karen Perry wonders why her son, like so many others suffering from drug addiction, didn't receive the same level of observation and overnight assessment at the hospital given to heart attack patients and others facing fatal diseases. A person brought to a hospital for an overdose, whether intentional or accidental, is facing a life-threatening incident, she said, and must be given the same respect and consideration afforded to other patients.

"The system failed us and failed Rich," she said. "We do not wish for any other parent or family member to have to live through the devastation of such a tremendous loss, especially when efforts could be made to save the life of another son, daughter, sister, brother, mother or father."



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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