

## House may fight pill mills by regulating 'dispensing' docs instead of using drug database

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Florida House leaders are mulling a new way to curb the state's prescription drug abuse epidemic: They want to go after the doctors dispensing the pain medications that ultimately wind up on the street.

House Speaker Dean Cannon said he wants to take an "upstream approach" to the prescription drug crisis by changing the way certain physicians are allowed to essentially run their own drug stores without oversight by the state pharmacy board.

The new approach makes the reality of the state's yet-to-be-implemented drug database even more precarious after Gov. Rick Scott said he wants to scrap the system.

"We know Florida is a place where a disproportionate amount of inappropriate prescriptions of these drugs is going on," Cannon, R-Winter Park, said Thursday. "Let's figure out how much and then let's look to see if there's an upstream solution."

Cannon has ordered Health and Human Services Committee Chairman Robert Schenck, who held a nearly two-hour long meeting on the drug database Thursday afternoon, to come up with a plan to reduce the supply of the pain medications on the front end.

Currently, 6,335 Florida doctors are licensed as "dispensing physicians," compared to 4,632 pharmacies licensed in the state.

Many pill mills operators have hired dispensing physicians so their customers don't have to go to a pharmacy to have their prescriptions filled.

The Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, created by lawmakers two years ago, would require pharmacists and dispensing physicians to report information about pain medications including oxycodone and hydrocodone and some other drugs including Xanax into a statewide system.

All doctors would have access to the database, but no doctor would be required to consult the database before writing a prescription.

Cannon said keeping track of the drugs will simply create "a great big database full of people for whom it is too late."

Instead, he's considering changing how dispensing physicians can hand out drugs and possibly creating new standards for deciding who can qualify as a dispensing physician.

"We're going to have to look at the method of distribution and the supply chain," he said. "It's not just that doctors are overprescribing. But in some cases it's the difference of whether they're prescribing them via a paper prescription that they later get filled or directly dispensing them. Those are the types of things we've got to dig on and figure out which delivery conduit is causing the most problems and then address that."

Cannon's plan may lead to a showdown with the Florida Medical Association, a lobby typically friendly to Cannon but unlikely to support any effort to limit doctors' practices.

"We'll see. I have a lot of confidence in my members," Cannon said.

Schenck's committee heard testimony from Department of Health officials, who outlined the state's complicated enforcement and regulation of physicians, pain clinics and pharmacies.

One of Schenck's aides also gave a run-down of studies that found drug databases used in at least two dozen other states haven't reduced the number of prescription drug overdoses.

"We are doing a lot of regulation in this subject. It's my opinion you cannot regulate, you cannot track, you cannot database ... none of these tools are actually stopping the problem," said Schenck, R-Spring Hill. "The one simple fact is it is way too easy for the drug dealers, the drug pushers and the drug addicts to get these drugs. That is the sole source of the problem."

But he ended the meeting before taking public testimony, although at least three individuals traveled from Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast to testify in support of the database.

"This is a big setback for us," Tequesta resident Karen Perry said tearfully. Perry founded Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education, or NOPE, after her son died of a drug overdose in 2003.

Perry handed Schenck a folder with details of more than 300 families whose loved ones had died from prescription drug overdoses.

"I think he probably just tossed it in the trash," she said.

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