

Painkiller makes it big on black market

By Keith Mulvihill

NEW YORK, Feb 09 (Reuters Health) - The US Department of Justice is becoming increasingly concerned about the illegal sale and use of the prescription painkiller OxyContin, a narcotic generically known as oxycodone hydrochloride.

A report issued in January from the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), part of the Department of Justice, states that "the effects of OxyContin make it a suitable substitute for heroin" and it has become the "product of choice (for abuse) in Maine, Ohio, and West Virginia, and in portions of eastern Kentucky, Maryland, western Pennsylvania, and rural southwestern Virginia."

To date, the report notes that at least 37 deaths can be attributed to the abuse of OxyContin.

OxyContin is a close cousin to the opioid morphine and is prescribed for the treatment of moderate to severe pain expected to last for more than a few days, explained James Heins, a spokesman for Purdue Pharma of Stamford, Connecticut--the drug's manufacturer.

The fact that OxyContin has similar effects of morphine and another opioid, heroin, makes the use of the drug attractive to the abuser population. While other prescription pain relievers such as Percocet, Percodan and Tylox contain oxycodone, they contain much lower doses of the drug. OxyContin contains anywhere from 10 milligrams (mg) to 160 mg of oxycodone, while the other drugs contain just 2.25 mg to 5 mg of the drug.

"The Police Chief in Pulaski (Virginia) reported in October 2000 that approximately 90% of all thefts, burglaries, and shoplifting incidents in the area were linked to the OxyContin trade," according to the NDIC.

The story is alarmingly similar for a number of rural areas in the eastern US; areas not typically associated with illicit drug abuse problems.

"We have definitely seen a significant increase in the number of seizures of illegal OxyContin tablets, and other prescription narcotics in Maine. OxyContin appears to be one of the most sought after prescription drugs of abuse and recently has really stood out," said James Cameron, an assistant Attorney General and the drug prosecution coordinator director for the state of Maine in Augusta.

"At least half of the seizures of illegal prescription drugs in Maine last year were of OxyContin," Cameron told Reuters Health.

"All of the OxyContin tablets that make their way to the black market are diverted from legitimate sources. We know that they are smuggled from Canada into Maine, stolen from pharmacies here in the US, stolen from patients with a legitimate prescription. In some cases illegal users and traffickers fake, or have a legitimate pain problem and will amass many prescriptions of the drug for illegal sales. Some patients with legitimate prescriptions have also been known to sell the drugs for profit," said Cameron.

On the street, OxyContin tablets tend to get about \$1 per milligram of the active ingredient oxycodone, according to Cameron. Tablets come in 10, 20, 40, 80 and 160 milligrams.

It has been said that OxyContin is very similar in terms of heroin regarding the type of high an abuser gets from the drug. Abusers often crush up the tablets and snort them or dissolve them and inject the drug, according to the NDIC report.

While all opioids have the potential to be habit forming, Heins pointed out that "in clinical trials (of OxyContin) with more than 6,000 patients, not one developed an addiction." Millions of patients have been prescribed OxyContin since it came on the market in 1996, Heins noted.

"Abusers of the drug circumvent the time-release properties of the tablet, which results in the immediate release of the active ingredient, oxycodone," Heins said. "Legitimate people taking the drug as prescribed by their physician do not experience the euphoria that drug abusers are seeking."

OxyContin is most often prescribed in pill form. The higher doses are intended to be time released over a 12-hour period for the relief of chronic or persistent pain. Patients are prescribed the drug for injuries, bursitis, dislocations, fractures, nerve-related pain, arthritis, and lower back and cancer pain.

"We are very concerned about the diversion of OxyContin tablets into the illegal market in some regions of the United States. We are already seeing the harmful effects that media reports are having on the appropriate prescribing of the drug. Patients who are appropriately taking the medication and controlling their pain are in some cases afraid to take the drug," Heins said.

"News reports have frequently dwelt on the potential for addiction stemming from the abuse of OxyContin. Very often these reports create fear and reticence among physicians and patients who use this medication appropriately to achieve pain control. When opioids are prescribed and used in accordance with the approved FDA labeling, they are safe and effective," according to a statement from Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of the drug.

The company also notes that that they are taking an active role, working with law enforcement agencies, to ensure that the drug is prescribed and used in a lawful manner.

"For people addicted to narcotics their number one motivation is to obtain more of the drug. They will go to almost any lengths to get more of the drug. If one drug is not available, they will try for something else. In the case of heroin, an illegal substance we know is not produced here in Maine...most of it comes from urban centers in New England," Cameron told Reuters Health.

"Legal drugs that are diverted into the black market do create a lot of challenges in terms of enforcement and monitoring drug trafficking," he said.

"It is a tough balancing act since we do not want to discourage doctors from prescribing a useful and necessary drug to legitimate patients," Cameron said.

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