

Sarasota weighs a law to curb drug abuse

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A Sarasota County effort to more closely monitor prescription painkillers is in the works as local leaders try to combat one of the worst prescription drug overdose rates in Florida.

The proposed law would require anyone seeking prescription painkillers to show photo identification at Sarasota County pharmacies. While the county attorney's office has just begun researching the legality of such a policy, if a local law is adopted it could be the first prescription drug monitoring program in Florida and a catalyst for statewide action.

"I know of no other counties in Florida that are doing this -- this is novel legislation," said Paul Sloan, who manages a Sarasota pain clinic and has lobbied local and state leaders for tougher prescription monitoring standards. "If enough counties do it, maybe it will catch on."

A Herald-Tribune analysis last year found that Southwest Florida ranked sixth in the state in drug overdoses and that Florida lacks the safeguards of other states.

The idea of creating a local prescription monitoring program was raised by county commissioners last month in response to discussions this summer with Sloan and Sarasota mother Cindy Harney, who began a nonprofit group to fight prescription drug abuse after her 20-year-old son, Garrett, died from an overdose in 2006.

Commissioners reiterated their desire for a local law Wednesday during a discussion about their priorities for the upcoming state legislative session.

One of the priorities is a statewide prescription monitoring program that 35 other states have adopted.

"People's lives are at stake," said Commissioner Joe Barbetta. "We certainly shouldn't be a leader in prescription drug deaths."

The Herald-Tribune analysis found that between 2001 and 2006, overdose deaths tripled in Sarasota, Manatee and Charlotte counties, and that the increase was driven by prescription painkillers.

Drug control advocates have lobbied for a statewide prescription monitoring program for the last six years to no avail. County leaders say a statewide program would be preferable to their local program, which is limited to checking identification and would not include a computer database that many states use to track drug users who shop at multiple pharmacies.

State lawmakers have blocked a database program, primarily because of concerns that a database would violate patients' privacy rights and that doctors might be reluctant to prescribe painkillers, even to people with legitimate needs.

But Sloan said he knows many doctors who support the program.

Sloan has turned 111 patients away from his pain clinic in the last year and a half and reported many to the police after he suspected they were abusing the drugs.

"I spend an incredible amount of time trying to catch these people because there is no database, but I'm willing to do it because these people threaten the business, they threaten doctor's licenses and ultimately they threaten their own lives," he said.

Sloan said the prescription monitoring effort should not be viewed as a criticism of pharmacists.

"They're very busy, but this is one of those little things that you need to do to put a dent in the problem," he said.

Commission Chairwoman Shannon Staub called the county's action a "baby step, but we have to start somewhere."

"It's going to make people think twice," added Commissioner Jon Thaxton.

Thaxton and Staub said they both were prescribed powerful painkillers and never had to show an ID at the pharmacy. "It seems simple; I'm not sure why they don't do it," Staub said.