

Prescription pills the new No. 1 enemy in drug fight

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By Bridget DiCosmo *Southeast Missourian*

Starting at 8 a.m. Thursday, detectives from the Scott County Sheriff's Department staked out a residence in the 400 block of William Street in Sikeston, Mo., based on information supplied by confidential informants.

By 5 p.m., at least a half-dozen officers had gone through the small white house executing a search warrant. They escorted one woman to the back seat of a police car while the other residents huddled on the porch, hands cuffed behind their backs.

The search didn't reveal cocaine, marijuana or methamphetamines, but police said they found exactly what they were looking for: about 150 tablets of Lorcet, a painkiller, and Xanax, an antidepressant.

The pending charges against the suspect, which according to Scott County Detective Branden Caid will be possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute, represent a recent crackdown on what Scott County Sheriff Rick Walter called the new No. 1 enemy in the battle on drugs: prescription pills.

"Almost every time we serve a warrant, there's prescription meds there," Walter said.

The seizures of pills and the knowledge that over the past five years they have become just as much of a street drug as crack cocaine or marijuana led Walter's department to forge a task force with the Mississippi County Sheriff's Department within the past few months to better the combat the prescription drug problem.

Used by millions

More than 7 million people currently abuse prescription drugs, according to Scott Collier, spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

According to a DEA survey of high school students across the nation, 9.7 percent of eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders admitted to abusing the painkiller Vicodin in 2005-2006; 5.5 percent of 12th-graders reported nonmedical use of OxyContin.

"Kids are getting more meds, stealing from their parents," said Mississippi County Sheriff Keith Moore.

There is a myth that prescription drugs cannot be as harmful as other drugs because, after all, they are medicine, Collier said.

But such drugs, when not used as prescribed by a doctor, can have side effects and can kill.

"You can take heroin or meth, and they pale in comparison to things you find in a pharmacy," said Richard Logan, a Charleston, Mo., pharmacist working with the Scott County Sheriff's Department.

A Drug Enforcement Administration 2002 report showed that according to 1,304 reports submitted by medical examiners and coroners in 32 states, there were 146 confirmed deaths caused by OxyContin and another 318 where the prescription painkiller was a suspected cause of death.

Started with prescription

Suzanne, 45, fell into the OxyContin trap when she was rear-ended while waiting at a drive-through, suffering a shattered vertebra and a popped disk. She had already been on disability for health problems but said she'd never so much as experimented with drugs.

A doctor placed Suzanne on OxyContin, and suddenly she felt well enough take a job as a bartender.

She felt great for eight months, full of energy, until she was taken off of the drug. Then she saw her life begin to spiral out of control as she sought relief from the withdrawal symptoms.

For the next several years, Suzanne and her husband lost three homes and filed for bankruptcy so she could afford paying \$50 to \$60 per milligram on the street for OxyContin, she said in an interview at the Scott County Sheriff's Department.

"He would give me money and tell me to go find my medicine," Suzanne said.

At one point, her addiction became so consuming she would spend five hours every two days sitting in an emergency room so she could get a few pills to tide her over.

"I'd go into raging fits where I'd want to rip my face off. My mind craved my medication," she said of the withdrawal symptoms. "I'd rather go through childbirth."

In addition to the financial and physical strife, Suzanne was doing deals with unsavory people, the same ones she now prays her children will steer clear of.

"I had to learn how to talk garbage and trashy when I was going to church beforehand," Suzanne said.

At one point, Suzanne said, her husband asked, "How far down are you going to take us?"

"I can't believe he's still with me," she said, sobbing.

Suzanne's troubles reached a climax when she turned to methamphetamines as a substitute for OxyContin and got caught.

Doctor-prescribed methadone has helped Suzanne stay clean from OxyContin, and now she's helping the Scott County Sheriff's Department understand how the prescription drug world is run, she said.

Suzanne is one of several confidential informants the department relies upon to infiltrate that world.

"I don't think there's a lot of people out there right now fearing arrests," Caid said.

In addition to making controlled buys and sales and using informants, the task force is designed to educate the public as well as police on the dangers of prescription drugs, Walter said.

That's where Logan comes in. The registered pharmacist assists police in identifying prescription pills when they find them during a drug bust.

What the sheriff's department would like to see is more cooperation between the medical community and police, Walter said.

Depending on the type of prescription drug, someone caught without a prescription could face a class C felony, punishable by up to seven years' incarceration. What makes filing charges in these types of drug cases so difficult, said Cape Girardeau narcotics officer Dan Seger, is that someone can present several explanations as to why they don't have a prescription, such as they lost it, or the pills belong to their parents.

Editor's note: Suzanne's name has been changed.