

Opioid abusers range from day laborers to doctors

By: Riley Johnson and Nicole Manna, Lincoln Journal Star

Opioid abuse in Nebraska hasn't existed in a vacuum. People from all walks of life have broken the law chasing their addictions, officials say.

They falsify their prescriptions, sell them on the street, rob pharmacists and, increasingly, drive while high, authorities say. The problem has even affected health insurance rates.

"Your mind is just racing to, 'Where am I going to go to get them?'" said Gene, a former addict who got so desperate he bought pills on the street and falsified a prescription.

"Anything and everything goes through your head. All of your self-pride goes away."

Most people don't wake up and decide to try OxyContin or Percocet, said Lincoln-Lancaster County Narcotics Unit Sgt. Duane Winkler.

"(They) form an addiction through a prescription and then try to get it illegally," he said.

Now-retired pharmacist Charles "Chas" Lierk saw a pain pill problem brewing long before it exploded at his family-owned pharmacy in Alliance. His worries mounted as pharmaceutical companies rolled out higher-dosage opioid medication, he said.

He feared patients would get addicted, and he wondered about the consequences if pharmacists couldn't comply with their demands.

"I really thought, 'Something's going to happen,'" Lierk said.

On June 12, 2012, Andres "Andy" Gonzalez walked into Thiele Pharmacy and Gifts in downtown Alliance, wielding a 9mm handgun and an assault rifle. The 27-year-old held Lierk hostage for seven hours before the pharmacist managed to run for his life, taking a bullet as he did. Gonzalez also injured three officers before dying in a gunfight with law enforcement.

No statewide data is kept on pharmacy robberies or burglaries, but Nebraska Pharmacy Association Executive Director Joni Cover said contacts across the state say they're up.

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Coalition Against Insurance Fraud

Lowie Christie, a 52-year-old North Dakota woman, was recently sentenced to 15 months in jail after she visited hundreds of medical facilities around the country, including in Nebraska, to get prescription drugs. She submitted about 1,830 claims to Medicare within six years and told the court she had an addiction.

Lincoln doctors and pharmacies have cut back on opioid prescriptions and keep an eye out for people seeking relief from "really vague" conditions, said Winkler.

Federal and state officials say Nebraska doctors haven't fueled opioid overuse as much as their counterparts elsewhere.

In the past three years, only 11 Nebraska physicians or pharmacists have surrendered federal certification allowing them to dole out controlled substances like opioids, Robacker said.

"I think that the doctors here are being a little bit more ethical," he said.

That doesn't mean doctors aren't getting in trouble because of the drugs though.

A 2015 report from Nebraska's U.S. Attorney said federal investigators often refer cases to the state Department of Health and Human Services,