

'Doctor shopping' is a 'daily problem'

By: Paul Feely, New Hampshire Union Leader

The arrests of several people last month on charges related to "doctor shopping" in Rockingham and Hillsborough counties have put a spotlight on the crime.

"Cases like that are just the tip of what's going on," said Trooper Marc Beaudoin, the Drug Diversion Investigator with the Narcotics and Investigations Unit of the New Hampshire State Police. "We are busy every week with cases like those, but they are only the most egregious cases. The amount of fraud every year in this state is easily into the millions of dollars."

"Doctor shopping" is a term applied to people who go from one doctor to another in an effort to obtain prescription drugs for illegitimate use.

The **Coalition Against Insurance Fraud**, an alliance of consumer groups, insurance companies and government agencies, put the cost of prescription painkiller abuse for insurers at up to \$72.5 billion in a 2007 study, the last report it compiled on the topic.

The study claims the average "doctor shopper" costs insurers \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year because fraudulent use of the medication can drive up the costs for legitimate patients.

"Everyone knows that doctor shopping is a problem," said Dr. Gilbert Fanciullo, director of the Pain Management Center at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon. "Doctors want to be able to help, they want to prescribe appropriate pain medications to treat conditions. But they also have to worry about who is addicted to the drug, who is diverting the drug, and who is abusing the drug."

According to Dr. James Martin, director of the emergency and EMS departments at St. Joseph Hospital in Nashua, the driving force behind the phenomenon is addiction.

"It's a daily problem," said Martin. "It impacts our ability to provide care to other patients."

Fanciullo said the time a physician spends trying to determine whether someone is looking to get their fix or legitimately in pain translates into longer wait times for others. He said doctors at his center ask a series of questions of anyone they treat in an attempt to determine whether they are lying about their condition.

He concedes the process is far from foolproof.

"You ask the questions, but they aren't going to stop everyone," said Fanciullo. "With so many addicts looking for prescription pills, it makes doctors hesitant to prescribe certain drugs.

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That lowers a person's chances of getting the pain relievers they legitimately should be getting."

Numbers on rise

Statistics on prescription drug abuse show the extent of the problem in the state. In the latest Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted in 2011, one in five high school students said they had taken prescription drugs - such as Oxycodone, Xanax or Adderall - without a prescription.

According to data provided by the New Hampshire Department of Justice, prescription drug overdoses rose from 40 in 1999 to 163 in 2007. The number climbed to 164 in 2009 (in 83 of those cases, the drug was lawfully prescribed, compared with 63 where it was illicitly obtained).

By comparison, there were 14 homicide deaths and 115 traffic deaths that year.

In the State Police Narcotics Unit, Beaudoin and civilian investigator Christopher Shambarger, a licensed pharmacist, investigate cases of doctor shopping and prescription fraud.

"It's really us against New Hampshire," said Beaudoin.

Beaudoin said many culprits photocopy their prescriptions, then visit multiple pharmacies. Others make their own prescriptions - some using computer programs, others going so far as to purchase special security paper over the Internet, mimicking what doctors use.