

Indiana taking steps to stem 'epidemic' of prescription drug abuse

State adds to controls on 'pill mills,' launches awareness campaign

by Indiana Sen. Ron Grooms (Senator.Grooms@iga.in.gov)

Drug overdose deaths have more than quadrupled in Indiana since 1999. According to a recent study by the Trust for America's Health, the Hoosier State has the 17th-highest drug overdose mortality rate in the country.

Most of these deaths do not result from use of illicit drugs such as heroin and cocaine, but rather are due to overdoses of prescription drugs. Prescription drugs, especially painkillers, are wreaking havoc on our society today, and this nationwide epidemic is only getting worse.

My colleagues and I in the Indiana General Assembly have been concerned about this trend for several years now. Prescription drugs can be highly addictive, destroy families and livelihoods, and — as we're seeing all too frequently — lead to premature death. Every 25 minutes, someone dies from a prescription drug overdose in the United States.

I believe there are three main reasons for this dangerous trend. First, doctors are overprescribing these medications. Second, these drugs are highly accessible in homes and on the street. Third, there is a lack of public knowledge about the serious dangers these drugs pose.

In Indiana, we are working to address these issues head on, creating a comprehensive solution to curbing prescription drug abuse in our communities.

Addiction-fueling 'pain clinics' on rise

Not unlike other states, Indiana recently experienced a rise in pain clinics — or "pill mills" — posing as legitimate medical facilities, but focused solely on prescribing large amounts of powerful pain medications. Instead of addressing actual medical conditions, these clinics fuel addictions and contribute to the rising abuse problem, with little to no state oversight.

In my southern Indiana community, we experienced this firsthand after Kentucky tightened its regulations on pain clinics in 2012, sending these types of businesses across state lines. Pill mills often only take cash, do not require physical exams before prescribing painkillers, and attract addicts and drug dealers.

During the 2013 legislative session, I worked on a measure to crack down on this type of business that leads to unsafe and reckless overprescribing of controlled substances such as hydrocodone and methadone.

Senate Enrolled Act 246, signed into law in May, requires facilities that dispense controlled substances to maintain a registration allowing them to do so, and calls on Indiana's Medical Licensing Board to develop statewide standards and protocols for the prescribing of these drugs. In October, the board adopted new rules that require more screening and monitoring of

patients to help doctors detect drug abuse. Patients are also required to sign a "treatment agreement" with doctors that fosters discussion about addiction risks.

Another provision in SEA 246 gives Indiana's attorney general more tools to investigate clinics that are suspected of overprescribing controlled substances.

Since January 2012, Attorney General Greg Zoeller's office has taken action against more than 15 Indiana doctors for prescribing addictive painkillers outside of what is considered medically appropriate.

I'm grateful Indiana has added some oversight to curb reckless overprescribing in our state. Our hope is that this will reduce addictions and stem the flow of dangerous prescription drugs into our communities.

A second factor that is driving prescription drug abuse in Indiana is how accessible these drugs are to those without a medical prescription, especially teens.

A 2011 "Youth Risk Behavior" survey of a group of high school students found that more than 20 percent reported they had taken prescription drugs one or more times without a doctor's prescription. Indiana ranked second highest among the 35 states where students were surveyed.

What's more, according to a 2012 "Monitoring the Future" survey, about 50 percent of high school seniors said that painkillers would be fairly or very easy to get.

Prescription drugs are more accessible to teens than illicit drugs because they can be found in home medicine cabinets, leftover from minor surgeries or illness, and never properly discarded.

I urge all families to clean up their medicine cabinets to ensure that unused prescription drugs don't wind up in the wrong hands. It is important not to simply throw away old medications, because dealers and addicts will comb through trash to find them.

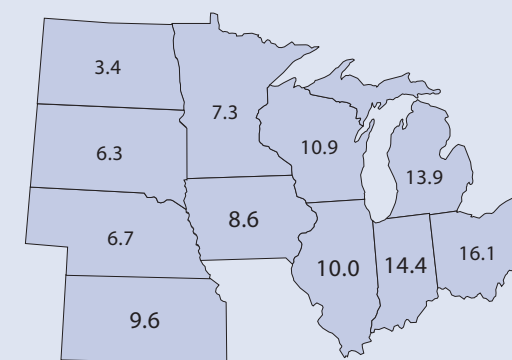
Leftover medications can be taken to advertised community events, such as Take Back Days or Household Hazardous Waste Days, or be dropped off at permanent collection sites, such as local police departments.

A final hurdle in the battle against prescription drug abuse is the public perception that these drugs are safer and less addictive than illegal drugs. Unfortunately, this perception is entirely false.

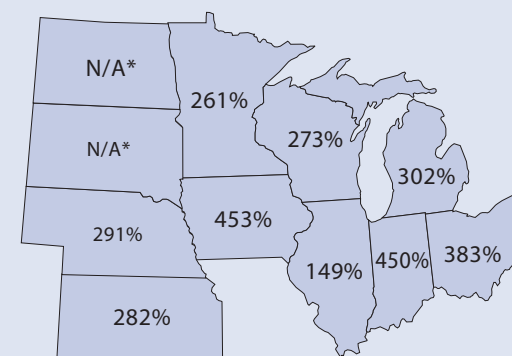
Prescription drugs have powerful effects, both emotionally and physically, on the body. These effects can intensify when doctor-supervised precautions are not taken, or if alcohol or other substances are added to the mix.

Attorney General Zoeller and the Indiana Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Task Force, on which I serve, launched a new public awareness campaign designed to shine a light on the prevalence and dangers of prescription drug abuse.

Prescription drug overdose mortality rates in Midwest (# per 100,000 people)



% increase in prescription drug overdose mortality rates, 1999-2010



* 1999 rate unavailable for North Dakota and South Dakota

Source: Trust for America's Health

Part of the campaign was the creation of a new comprehensive website, www.BitterPill.IN.gov, to serve as a one-stop shop for facts about prescription drug abuse and misuse. The site offers resources on how to recognize the signs of someone who is drug-dependent, how to seek help and more.

Though we've made important progress, Indiana still has a long way to go to reduce prescription drug abuse and prevent unnecessary deaths. During the next legislative session, I will continue to work with experts in the field and neighboring states to find a solution to this national epidemic.

Moreover, I challenge parents, educators, health professionals, coaches and community members to talk to loved ones about prescription drug abuse. Anyone can be at risk, and it's up to all of us to keep our neighborhoods safe, aware and drug free. ✨

Sen. Ron Grooms, a Republican from Jeffersonville, was first elected to the Indiana Senate in 2010. He is a retired community pharmacist and former pharmacy owner.

Submissions welcome

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