

[back to article](#)



Printed on page A22

# Florida needs a system for monitoring deadly, addictive medications

*Published: Sunday, March 22, 2009 at 1:00 a.m.*

Despite pleas from tearful mothers who lost their children to overdoses, concerned pharmacists and ethical experts in pain management, the Florida Legislature refused again last year to authorize a system to monitor the prescription of high-powered and addictive drugs.

One result of that failure was not surprising: Drug-related deaths rose again, as they have over the past six years, according to the latest available figures.

The number of drug-related deaths in Florida rose to 4,055 from January to June 2008, compared to 3,980 during the first six months of 2007. (The Medical Examiners Commission collects cause-of-death data; these numbers are from the most recent report.)

The latest summary report by the medical examiners reaches many of the same conclusions contained in the previous year's report.

In the reports, medical examiners are asked to distinguish between drugs being the "cause" of death or merely "present" in the body at death.

The three "most frequently occurring" drugs present in decedents were alcohol, in 1,923 deaths; Benzodiazepines (tranquilizers such as Xanax and valium), 1,469; and cocaine, 955.

Of the three, only cocaine is illegal in all cases. During the reporting period, illegal heroin was still the most lethal drug -- killing the most people using it -- but it was not among the seven drugs that caused the most deaths.

## Fatal connection

To grasp the link between prescription drugs and deaths, consider that, according to the report, "the drugs that caused the most deaths were":

Oxycodone, a narcotic pain killer sold as OxyContin, and contained in Percocet and Percodan -- 423 deaths.

Ben zodiazepines -- 392 deaths.

Cocaine -- 360.

Methadone, a pain killer that is also used in heroin detoxification programs -- 324 deaths.

Alcohol -- 207 deaths.

Morphine, an opiate-based pain killer known as MS-Contin in tablet form and Roxanol in liquid form -- 129 deaths.

Hydrocodone, a narcotic pain killer included in Vicodin and Lortab -- 126 deaths.

"The prescription drugs ... tracked through this report continued to be found more often than illicit drugs" in decedents in both lethal and nonlethal levels, the medical examiners stated.

Found more often than illicit drugs.

That fact alone demonstrates that Florida needs to focus on prescription-drug abuse and the inadequate regulation of drugs labeled as controlled substances.

In our region, people from a wide range of backgrounds have spoken out about the crisis and the need for prevention actions.

Cindy Harney and Ruth Lyerly, local mothers whose sons succumbed to prescription-drug overdoses, created Families Against Addictive Drug Abuse. They campaign courageously and tirelessly to raise awareness about the problems associated with easy availability of drugs through clinics known as "pill mills," fraudulent prescriptions and the black market.

Dr. Rafael Miguel, the director of the pain medicine program at the University of South Florida, has lobbied long and hard for the Legislature to create an electronic, privacy-protected data base that would give health care practitioners, pharmacies and pharmacists access to patient medication histories. The data base would allow ethical prescribers and pharmacists to detect excessive numbers of prescriptions, indicative of either drug abuse or illegal resales.

Dr. Miguel, who practices at a Sarasota Memorial Health Care System clinic and is certified by the American Board of Anesthesiology, also supports requiring free-standing pain clinics to be operated by a board-certified pain-management physician.

A Sarasota pharmacist and a Venice pain management clinic administrator have both gone on the record in the Herald-Tribune with their concerns about excessive and fraudulent prescriptions in our region.

Stories across Florida make clear that some doctors and clinics overprescribe, and that many patients shop for doctors and clinics until they find the drugs they want to take or sell.

Thirty-eight states have some form of system that enables health care professionals to

monitor and flag prescriptions for narcotics and potentially addictive drugs. Lacking such a system, Florida is, Dr. Miguel says, "a national embarrassment."

Welcome legislation

Fortunately, pending legislation -- the committee substitute for Senate Bill 462 -- would authorize the state Department of Health to create an electronic "prescription drug validation program" intended to provide the monitoring and protections necessary. The bill offers appropriate protections for patient security, targets only the high-power pain killers and sedatives, and clearly states that the legislation should not interfere with "legitimate prescribing" of controlled substances.

The Florida Medical Association supports this bill, as do concerned doctors and pharmacists, and survivors of the victims of drug-related overdoses.

We support it, too. It won't end prescription-drug abuse but it will help keep the problem from worsening.

The technology and the need to create this data bank exist. Now it's time for the Legislature to express the political will to approve it -- before the passing of another year of rising drug-related deaths.

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This story appeared in print on page A22

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