



Local grassroots group seeks to stem abuse of prescription pain medication. (September 1, 2006)

“There is a perception that since it comes from a doctor, it is safe,” says Jim Tilla, a Chewelah area resident who has seen firsthand the consequences of the abuse of pain killing medication. “It steals life away from a person.”

Tilla explained that the most widely abused pain medications include OxyContin, Oxycodone, and Hydrocodone. “These drugs are synthetic heroin and horribly addictive,” Tilla added. “I’ve seen abuse take lives and destroy families.”

Tilla is the catalyst for the newly-formed group Prescriptions for Life, a grassroots organization in Chewelah seeking to educate the public – especially parents and children – about the dangers of prescription drug abuse. The group is also supporting implementation of a prescription monitoring program that would share prescription information between doctors, pharmacists and law enforcement.

“Prescriptions for Life is a group that is working to increase the accountability in the chain of custody of prescription medications,” stated Chewelah Police Sergeant Mark Burrows. “We hope to accomplish this by initiating a prescription monitoring program, like Idaho has, to reduce the problem over the pharmacy counters.”

According to Tilla’s wife Sherry, also a member of the group, the monitoring program is aimed at stemming the tide of multiple prescriptions written for a single individual for the same ailment by different doctors and/or filled at different pharmacies. Individuals engaging in this behavior, she said, are either abusing the pills or selling them as illegal drugs, or both.

“Every month pharmacies will simply email their records of everyone who has received a prescription to the Washington State Board of Pharmacy,” Tilla explained. “Multiple prescriptions attached to one name will send up a red flag and that name will be sent to doctors and pharmacies. That is it.”

“We are not a watchdog group desiring to look over the shoulder of a doctor who is seeking to help a patient,” added Police Chief Troy Anderson, also an active member. “It is not a group that has the intention of interfering with the management of pain.”

The program would be a first for Washington State, but not the first in the country where 33 states have already adopted legislation addressing this issue and 23 have operational programs in place. Five more states have legislation pending.

According to Dr. Paul Larsen, who has a family practice in Chewelah, the discussion of prescription drug abuse is a relatively new topic for the medical field.

“Seven years ago, when I was completing my residency, we never even talked about prescription drug abuse,” Dr. Larsen said. “This is a relatively new thing, although we in the medical community have been struggling for years with the medications being abused.”

Dr. Larsen explained that he tries to use caution when prescribing pain medication, but he can “only do so much.”

“When people come in with complaints of pain, we trust them and we treat them,” Dr. Larsen said. “We see the drugs being abused, but we are doing all that we can do and we are in a corner. The community really needs to be the ones to take a stand and to educate themselves and their children that prescription drugs are not safe drugs and it is illegal.”

Sherry Tilla, who works as a fourth grade teacher at the Valley School, hopes to see a portion of the education piece provided in the classroom through the school’s Life Skills class.

“I think it is important for kids to learn tools to say no and to learn about ways to deal with things going on in their lives that are stressful without choosing alcohol or other substances,” Tilla said.

Jerry Pugh, Jenkins High School Assistant Principal, also sees education as a critical goal. “That’s why Chewelah School District has added two Student Assistant Specialists at the middle and high school levels this year,” Pugh explained. “These positions were made possible by a grant administered by Educational Service District 101 and will help us to better educate our students about these issues.”

Police Sergeant Burrows said that he also hopes to make information available to people so they can “reduce the chances of personal addiction, reduce the chances of being victims of theft and reduce the chances of being taken advantage of by friends who may want to 'borrow' a pill.”

Dr. Larsen said that he looks forward to seeing a Frequently Asked Questions sheet about pills being abused, signs of abuse and ways to lock pills up. According to a report released last month, there were 35 deaths caused by prescription drug overdoses in Spokane County in 2005, which exceeded the number of deaths caused by illegal drugs such as methamphetamine. Reacting to this report, Dr. Larsen confirmed similar increases in the Chewelah area where he recalled at least four deaths in just the last two years. “This is in contrast to my previous five years of practice in Chewelah when I was aware of no deaths due to abuse of pain medication,” Dr. Larsen said. “And this doesn’t even count the families destroyed by addiction.”

Community support for Prescriptions for Life has been overwhelming, according to the group’s members.

“Everyone we have talked to has been very supportive,” Police Chief Anderson said. “We have talked with people in the medical field, business leaders, pharmacies, schools...we don’t expect much of a problem in finding partners.”

According to Anderson, current partners already include the Northeast Washington Health Programs, Northeast Tri-County Health District, South Stevens County Foundation, Chewelah, Valley and Summit Valley School Districts, the Chewelah City Mayor, the Chewelah Police Department, Educational Service District 101, and Akers Drug Store in Chewelah. The group has raised \$7,000 to date and seeks \$50,000 by October 1st.

“If we can improve the system to make it less vulnerable to abuse then we have accomplished a worthy goal,” said Police Sergeant Burrows. “This is a grassroots group that is spreading its roots as wide as possible at this time. We are looking for partners to support us.”

Prescriptions for Life has just hired Brenda St. John as its secretary. Brenda currently works out of the Catholic Church office.

The group will launch its website www.Rx4life.org soon. For now, information is available by calling Brenda at 935-4529 or writing Prescriptions for Life, PO Box 941, Chewelah, WA 99109. Much needed donations may be sent to the same address. All donations are tax deductible.