



Local group to speak at regional health conference (March 13, 2007)

The Chewelah-area group, Prescriptions For Life, has been invited to speak at the Northwest Region Rural Health Conference in Spokane on March 22.

According to the Washington State Office of Community and Rural Health, the group will be providing the “on-the-ground, grass-roots community response to the issue of prescription drug abuse in Washington state, particularly in rural areas.”

Sherry Tilla, mother to a recovering prescription pain medication abuser and co-founder of Prescriptions For Life, will be speaking at the region’s largest annual gathering of public health administrators, board members, doctors, nurses and rural health clinic representatives. She will talk about the efforts being made by her group to “reduce, and eventually eliminate the abuse of pain medication” in the areas in Stevens County covered by the Valley, Chewelah and Summit Valley School Districts.

“I plan to speak about the history and goals of our group, and the need for a prescription monitoring program,” stated Tilla. “Also, as a more personal goal, I will talk about the lack of treatment options in our area for people with addiction and my wish to get health professionals on board with treating addiction. This includes having doctors talk with patients about addiction and offer quality advice and alternatives for treatment to people who have the nerve to talk with their doctor about addiction.”

Her talk will serve as the culmination of a three-part presentation. First to present will be Dr. Jennifer Sabel, Ph.D., an epidemiologist with the Washington State Department of Health. Dr. Sabel will present data and trends across the state showing a dramatic rise in deaths due to prescription drugs.

“A couple of years ago we started noticing that the deaths classified as poisonings were going up,” Dr. Sabel said. “We did more research into why and discovered that the majority of poisonings were due to drug overdose, and the majority of those were pain killers or opiates.”

According to Stevens County Coroner Patti Hancock, 43 percent of the accidental deaths in Stevens County were attributed to drug overdoses in 2005. Prescription drug overdoses rose by another 40 percent in 2006. According to a study released last month by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, next to marijuana, the most common illegal drugs teens are using to get high on are prescription medications. In Washington state, males between the ages of 45 – 54 are at the highest risk, according to Dr. Sabel’s data.

State health researchers found an 800 percent increase in deaths linked to prescription opiates in Washington state, rising from 45 reported instances in 1995 to 411 in 2004. The City of Spokane went from virtually no prescription medication-related deaths to 48 cases in the same time frame, showing the highest rate per population in the state.

“I expect there will be a little bit of shock at the conference,” she added. “A lot of physicians are not aware that it is such a big problem.”

Next to speak will be Dr. Diana Yu, MD who will discuss the process of addiction, emergency care, coordination of programs, and other information from the health point of view. Finally, Tilla will demonstrate how Prescriptions For Life is leading the way in working to address this issue in her rural community.

“To achieve success, we are gathering support and participation from educators, medical providers, pharmacists, business leaders, law enforcement officers, elected officials, law makers, community members, parents and former pain medication abusers,” Tilla said. “With a strong emphasis on educational programs and community initiatives, and through the cultivation of public awareness and legislative support, we seek to provide support and guidance to our community for greater health and happiness.”

The group's efforts are also aimed at laying the groundwork for implementation of an efficient and effective statewide prescription drug monitoring program.

"The program would in no way affect legal users of pain medication," Tilla asserted. "The program's sole purpose would be to provide information to doctors and pharmacists about people that are seeking to illegally attain prescription pain medication."

Prescriptions for Life formed in early 2006 under the umbrella of the Southern Stevens County Health Care Association, a 501(c)3 nonprofit established in 1978. For more information, visit www.Rx4LifeChewelah.org or call (509) 935-4529.