



American College of Medical Toxicology

Physicians Specializing in the Care of Poisoned Patients

Michael Jackson and Heith Ledger were not unique – prescription drug abuse has reached epidemic proportions

Phoenix, AZ July 14, 2009 An emerging epidemic of prescription drug abuse in the United States has become a major public health emergency, outpacing in the amount of harm and deaths other current threats such as the H1N1 virus, terrorism, and heroin and cocaine abuse. This epidemic is far from limited to well publicized cases such as the tragic deaths of Michael Jackson and Keith Ledger. Affecting children even more than adults, recent research has shown that the use of illicit drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine, and marijuana has given way to prescription drugs, with 1 in 5 teenagers having abused a prescription pain killer to get high, potentially with fatal results.¹

These drugs are easily obtained and are often abused with the belief that as medications they are safer than illicit drugs. The most commonly abused drugs are pain killers, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and stimulants, such as those intended to treat ADHD such as Ritalin and amphetamine ---- addicting drugs that can cause serious physical harm, or death, when abused, mixed with each other, or with alcohol.

Data from the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention² indicate that poisoning, including those from prescription drug abuse, is now the second leading cause of injury death in the US, having doubled from 1976 to 2006, and has increased 13% from 2005 to 2006, while motor vehicle accidents and other some other causes of traumatic death have declined.

According to Paul Wax, MD, Executive Director of the American College of Medical Toxicology (www.acmt.net) the organization representing board certified physicians in the United States subspecialty certified in this medical discipline: “The use of powerful drugs such as opioid analgesics such as Demerol or oxycodone, or sedating drugs such as sleeping pills or tranquilizers – when used inappropriately – will continue to cause senseless deaths unless further regulations are initiated that monitor and control the use of these drugs. Deaths from these drugs when used inappropriately are expected given their pharmacologic and toxicologic properties. Medical toxicologists are called to treat and review these tragic cases far too often.”

The American College of Medical Toxicology, urges that the following steps be implemented to quell this epidemic.

1. All states should institute a monitoring program of the filling of prescriptions for scheduled substances by individuals. This information should be available to all prescribing physicians and health care facilities.

¹ Research done by the Partnership for a Drug Free America

² Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports 58 (24); 674, June 26,2009

2. Licensing boards should institute requirements for training about prescription drug abuse for physicians and other individuals with prescription writing powers. Such an effort was shown to be very successful over forty years ago in the United Kingdom, where the CURB program resulted in a dramatic change in prescribing practices.
3. Licensing boards and the US government should take strong measures to stop the practice of prescription writing over the internet by physicians who have no established physician-patient relationship.
4. Licensing boards and the US drug Enforcement Agency should aggressively discipline Physicians and other health care providers who indulge in the practice of writing non-medically indicated prescriptions.
5. The US Food and Drug Administration should encourage pharmaceutical companies to produce medications in a form where they are less likely to be abused, for example, by having matrices that cannot be made to liberate medications that give an acute effect from sustained release preparations.