

## Silent killer: Overdose deaths reach epidemic proportions

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After years of calling Utah's highways home, the Grim Reaper has a new address. He's living in your medicine cabinet under assumed names - oxycodone, hydrocodone, fentanyl, morphine, methadone.

These are prescription medications that provide effective short-term and long-term pain relief to millions of people. Without them, many would suffer terribly and some of those would seek relief in suicide. Taken as prescribed, these powerful drugs can make life bearable for the pain-wracked patient.

However, they are also addictive and, when taken recreationally or otherwise abused, can be ruthlessly lethal. The overdose deaths they are causing are approaching epidemic proportions in Utah.

In 2006, according to the Utah Department of Health, more Utahns - 307 - died from overdoses of prescription pain medication than died in auto accidents (287), or from illegal drug overdoses (96).

Statistics reveal that prescription pain medications can be indiscriminate killers. Fifty-one percent of the victims last year were male, 49 percent female. At least one overdose death was recorded in 25 of Utah's 29 counties. And the average age of the victims was 41.

It's not a new phenomenon. Deaths from pain medication have been rising since the early 1990s. From a low of 32 in 1991, the death toll reached 109 in 2000, 201 in 2002 and 308 in 2005.

A nominal increase might be expected. After all, Utah is a growing state and that means more doctors writing more prescriptions for more people. But the death rate far exceeds the growth rate. In the past five years, 1,285 Utahns have died of prescription drug overdoses. If that many Utahns were homicide victims, everyone would be screaming bloody murder.

Worse, there is potential for even more deaths as Utah leads the nation in the illegal use of prescription drugs. A recent federal study determined that 6.5 percent of Utahns age 12 or older used a prescription pain medication without a doctor's order in the past year.

Now, finally, state officials are taking steps to deal with the problem. The health department announced last week that it will partner with other state agencies to study prescription databases to determine the causes and risk factors related to prescription drug deaths. When the study is completed in two years, officials will formulate a prevention plan, develop guidelines for health-care providers and launch a public education campaign.

We're glad to see that the Department of Health will take its time with the study because the issue is complex and doctors should not be prevented from prescribing the drugs they believe are most beneficial to patients.

But the state shouldn't wait to raise public awareness. Doctors need to be reminded to check the state database to weed out drug dealers and recreational users who "doctor shop" for prescriptions they don't need. Pharmacists should clearly warn customers of possible drug interactions.

And the general public needs to learn that these drugs, if used improperly, can kill you quick.

The statistics speak for themselves.