

Teens Abuse Prescription Drugs... MD's Fault?

So where does [a] physically robust teenager obtain her pills? Weeks earlier, she had a tonsillectomy, a minor though uncomfortable procedure by any standards. The surgeon wrote a prescription for 80 tablets. Mary spent the next week in a narcotized and medically sanctioned bliss, until her mother confiscated the last 20 tablets.

excerpts from essay *When Teenagers Abuse Prescription Drugs, the Fault May Be the Doctor's* by **Howard Markel MD** in **New York Times** 27 Dec 2005

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/27/health/27essa.html> (

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Every Thursday evening, I counsel a group of teenagers with serious substance abuse problems. None of the youngsters elected to see me. Typically, they were caught using drugs, or worse, by their parents or a police officer and were then referred to my clinic.

To be sure, all the usual intoxicants - alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines, LSD and cocaine - are involved. But a new type of addiction has crept into the mix, controlled prescription drugs, including potent opiate painkillers, tranquilizers and stimulants used to treat attention deficit disorders...

Last December, [one of my group] was taken to the hospital for an overdose of hallucinogenic mushrooms, alcohol, and ketamine, a chemical cousin of angel dust that doctors sometimes use to anesthetize patients and that, more commonly, veterinarians use to sedate large animals.

Lately, she has been playing with one of the strongest opiates and potentially addictive painkillers ever created, Oxycontin. She downs a few with a single shot of vodka and calls the combination "the sorority girl's diet cocktail," because it simultaneously allows for a stronger kick of inebriation and far fewer calories than mere alcohol alone.

The most recent Monitoring the Future report, the continuing study of teenage drug use conducted by the University of Michigan and the National Institutes of Drug Abuse since 1975, found that 5.5 percent of all high school seniors abused Oxycontin, up from 4 percent in 2002. Oxycontin abuse has increased 26 percent since 2002 among 8th, 9th and 12th graders...

At medical conferences, I hear colleagues fault parents who abuse and obtain these controlled substances but leave them easily accessible in their unlocked medicine chests where teenagers can help themselves. Other experts fault the Internet, where almost anyone can obtain controlled prescription drugs from offshore pharmacies with a few clicks on a home computer...

None of these targets come close to the real root of the problem. Many doctors are too quick to write prescriptions for these powerful drugs.

The National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse recently reported that 43.3 percent of all American doctors did not even ask patients about prescription drug abuse when taking histories; 33 percent did not regularly call or obtain records from a patient's previous doctor or from other physicians before writing such prescriptions; 47.1 percent said their patients pressured them into prescribing these drugs; and only 39.1 percent had had any training in recognizing prescription drug

abuse and addiction.

Yet from 1992 to 2002, prescriptions written for controlled substances increased more than 150 percent, three times the increase in prescriptions for all other drugs.

The morning after hearing about Mary's Oxycontin holiday, I called her surgeon and asked him whether he had read her medical chart detailing an extensive history of substance abuse. "Why did you prescribe this narcotic bazooka when a BB gun of a painkiller such as acetaminophen might have done the trick?" I asked.

Sheepishly, the surgeon replied, "Well, I guess I wasn't thinking." ... (full essay (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/27/health/27essa.html>))

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