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LAWMAKERS URGED TO FIGHT PILL MILLS Local, federal officers seeking help in stemming growing numbers of fatal overdoses DRUGS: Doctor shopping legal in Texas

BYLINE: By LISE OLSEN, HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Symptoms of the region's prescription pill problems:

Accidental deaths: More than 1,200 in Houston; more than 200 in Jefferson County (Beaumont)

Pill mills: More than 150 in Houston alone

Rogue clinic owner profits: As much as \$1.2 million cash per year per site

Doctor shopping rings: Recruit and pay the homeless to pose as patients

SOURCE: Overview of Pharmaceutical Abuse & Diversion: A Growing Threat

The prescription drug plague that has turned Houston into a center for "doctor-shopping" rings, rogue cash-only clinics and accidental overdose deaths is now threatening the entire state, according to an intelligence report to be released today by local and federal drug enforcement officials.

Houston's **High Intensity Drug Trafficking** Area, a coalition of law enforcement officials, urges Texas lawmakers to crush the major sources of illicit prescription-dealing by outlawing so-called "doctor shopping," modernizing the prescription drug monitoring program and providing more support for the state's new pain clinic registry.

At least 150 rogue cash-only pain clinics - also called "pill mills" or "doc in a box" - operate in and around Houston, cited by the U.S. drug czar as one of three hubs for clinics nationwide. Houston also has become nationally known for its concentration of doctor-shopping rings run by bosses who recruit local homeless and halfway house dwellers and then ferry "patients" to several different doctor appointments in a single day to get drugs for resale.

Other pill problems have popped up elsewhere in Texas: a plague of "drugged" drivers in Lumberton; a related wave of prescription fraud prosecutions in Corpus Christi; so-called snowbirds importing meds from Mexico; and teens popping and partying with pills pilfered from medicine cabinets, says the report by the Houston Intelligence Support Center.

Overdose deaths by prescription also have increased - 1,200 deaths recorded in Harris County, 233 in Jefferson County and another 190 in Calcasieu Parish in Louisiana since 2006, according to officials interviewed by the Houston Chronicle. The Chronicle reported Sunday on the death toll in Harris County, which included teens, a nurse, a working mom, retirees, an engineer, businessmen, grandparents and a race car driver.

'A foot in the door'

Regional drug enforcement officials first called for prescription drug reforms in 2007, when the Legislature approved a law to begin monitoring medicines tied to a popular and potentially lethal "Trio" prescription drug

cocktail: hydrocodone, alprazolam and carisprodol (often sold as Vicodin, Xanax and Soma, respectively).

But the system lacks a secure website for law enforcement and entries can be delayed for up to six weeks.

"It was a foot in the door and there were some changes, but it hasn't resolved the problem," said Stan Furce, the longtime director of Houston's **HIDTA**. "We have people from every other (Gulf Coast) state coming here to bring their drugs home - Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida."

Louisiana already has banned doctor shopping. But Texas allows the practice, which has prevented lawmen from arresting some of the region's most prolific and public prescription drug dealers.

Currently, anyone in the state can "legally visit any number of doctors at any time, receiving prescriptions for the same medications from each health care professional," the report notes. Dozens of people in Houston-area ZIP codes have obtained 10 or more prescriptions for the same addictive Trio medicines on the same day, according to 2009 and 2010 prescription statistics obtained by the Chronicle.

More than 100,000 Trio prescriptions have been issued so far in 2010.

State Sen. Tommy Williams, R-Woodlands, the legislator who has led reform efforts, said he will reintroduce a bill to outlaw doctor shopping in 2011 and review other proposals.

"We'll be looking at other state doctor shopping statutes and will hope to get it right here the first time," he said.

In Louisiana, Calcasieu Parish District Attorney John DeRozier recently busted an unlikely major drug dealer: a 60-year-old disabled diabetic, who had obtained dozens of pain pill prescriptions by "shopping" at Houston-area doctors and resold them from his home in Lake Charles. DeRozier has been a leading advocate for reform in Louisiana - and in Texas, where he says most Lake Charles pill pushers now obtain their drugs since Louisiana adopted its own pain clinic registration law in 2005.

Most Lake Charles residents' prescription overdose deaths have been linked to Houston clinics, he said.

Rogue pain clinics

Many Houston pain clinics are legitimate medical practices - operated by reputable doctors who conduct thorough exams, perform legitimate tests and treat patients by referral for an array of chronic or terminal ailments.

In contrast, rogue pain clinic owners tend to skimp on overhead by skipping medical insurance and furniture and then recruiting and retaining doctors - sometimes inexperienced foreign graduates or physicians with disciplinary histories - as so-called "medical directors."

Some medical directors never visit clinics or examine patients, but supply pre-signed prescription pads in exchange for monthly payments of \$5,000 to \$8,000 cash, the report says.

Cash-paying patients can obtain prescriptions after only cursory exams, the report says. Jefferson County Sheriff Mitch Woods, a **HIDTA** board member, said his own undercover officers have visited many clinics in the Beaumont area where doctors acted as prescription drug dealers. In one case, two cash-paying patients were "examined" simultaneously in the same room, he said.

Rogue clinic owners rake in as much as \$1.2 million a year - \$5,000 a day per clinic - and often multiply their profits with satellite locations.

In 2009, Williams sponsored a bill to create the state's first pain clinic registration program. It required all clinics to be run by a physician with no significant disciplinary history. But so far, only 49 so-called pain clinics have been certified - about a third of those that operate in Harris County alone.

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