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Painkiller addiction: One of many

by: KIM ARCHER World Staff Writer
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Facing the light of day

Doris L. [not her real name] looks like the girl next door, an unlikely candidate for a devastating addiction to painkillers.

Turns out, the 32-year-old Tulsan could be the poster child.

"If you could put on special glasses to see who is addicted to opiates, it would scare people to death. They are the last people you think it would be," said Mark Woodward, with the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Control.

"They come from every background, from street people to professionals. They are school teachers, police officers, lawyers, doctors and housewives."

Doris L. was one of about 87,000 Oklahomans illegally using prescribed painkillers such as hydrocodone, a projection experts said is on the conservative side.

"I weighed 108 pounds, and my family said I looked like death warmed over," she said. Her five-year odyssey into addiction is one Doris L. is ready to keep in her past.

"I had no interaction with anybody. The house was completely dark. I was depressed and disassociated from my friends or family. I didn't want them to see me that way," she said.

Tulsa is no different from other cities across the nation that are filled with people addicted to prescription drugs, mostly opiates such as hydrocodone, Woodward said.

"Sadly, it's something you see here in Oklahoma on a daily basis," he said.

The recent string of arrests of several Bartlesville residents charged with hydrocodone distribution illustrates how widespread the problem is.

An estimated 6.4 million Americans abuse prescription drugs, mostly opiate pain relievers

such as hydrocodone or oxycodone, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"The most abused and addictive drugs are prescription painkillers," said Dr. Peter Alan Rao, a Tulsa psychiatrist who treats opiate addiction.

"It's very easy to get a prescription from a doctor. And kids steal them from their parents' medicine cabinet," he said.

Rao's patients are mostly middle-aged or younger whose addiction was precipitated by a painful injury or a major operation.

"A lot of my folks say they got opiates for months longer than they needed it," he said. "People are sucked into being addicted to these drugs. You have no idea that your body is developing a habit for this."

Doris confessed her addiction sneaked up on her. She initially used hydrocodone, or Lortab, to kill the pain from bulging discs in her back and later from surgery to fix a bleeding ulcer.

"There wasn't anything strong enough to get rid of the pain," Doris said. One pill turned into two. Two turned into four.

"I turned into a zombie," she said, spending days in bed with the curtains drawn.

Finally, she heard her small son ask her husband, "Where's Mommy?" Her husband answered. "Mommy's in bed. She's sick..."

That is part of what got Doris to seek help.

"I didn't want to be that mommy," she said. "I didn't want my son to see me being in bed and not doing the mommy things. And it wasn't fair to my husband either."

Doris also had been involved in three automobile accidents during a six-month period while under the influence of hydrocodone. All were her fault.

"I was ready to change. I knew there had to be something out there to help," she said. Doris eventually found her way to Rao.

He is one of eight Tulsa doctors certified by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to treat opiate addicts with Suboxone, a drug that reduces opiate cravings and suppresses withdrawal symptoms.

A few other doctors are certified in surrounding areas.

"For the longest time, there was basically no treatment for these people," Rao said. "Studies have shown that 90 percent of opiate addicts cannot stay away from it on their own. That reflects how powerful the biology of this addiction is."

He said there is a lot of misinformation about Suboxone floating around, even among doctors. It is safe, nonaddictive, and it works, Rao said.

Many former opiate addicts refer to it as the miracle drug.

"With this drug, opiate addiction went from the worst thing to try to help to the most treatable

psychiatric problem I see," he said.

The drug is expensive at \$600 to \$800 a month. But Rao said many insurance companies will pay for it. And even if they do not, he said it often is less expensive than the drug habit itself.

In his 1-1/2 years of use, Rao said 90 percent of his patients who have been treated with Suboxone have remained clean. Those who are treated with the drug must be highly motivated to quit, he said.

The treatment includes the medication, random urine tests, and signing a contract pledging to stop taking opiates.

"You can't take opiates with this because you could inadvertently overdose and die," he said.

Doris said when she first took Suboxone, she felt an immediate effect.

"All of a sudden, a light bulb turned on and I was awake. I thought, 'I'm alive. I'm well. I'm not sick,' " she said.

One memory she holds dear is her husband's reaction once she took the Suboxone.

"I remember my husband saying, 'I have my wife back,' " she said.

Doris has been drug-free since June, and says she has not craved a pain pill since.

"I would have been drowning in an ocean without Suboxone and Dr. Rao," she said. "This was the beginning of my new life."

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