

DEA Reproves OxyContin Maker¹

WASHINGTON (AP) The company that makes OxyContin is partly to blame for growing abuse of the prescription painkiller, say the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The DEA blames the drug for 117 deaths in 31 states in the past two years, and the agency believes it is the likely cause in 179 other deaths, including five overdose deaths in the Myrtle Beach area. DEA Administrator Asa Hutchinson said Tuesday.

Earlier this week, OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma L.P. defended its Myrtle Beach-area sales representatives when federal officials said the representatives failed to alert authorities after they received warnings from pharmacists that Comprehensive Care and Pain Management Clinic in Myrtle Beach might have been overprescribing the pain medication.

Comprehensive Care and Pain Management Clinic closed in June after the DEA suspended the narcotics licenses of six doctors who worked there. The doctors deny any wrongdoing and will appeal the suspensions at hearings expected to take place beginning in January.

Hutchinson told a House Appropriations subcommittee that the drug maker's "aggressive marketing practices" have made the drug more readily available. The number of OxyContin prescriptions had grown and reached 5.8 million in 2000.

Hutchinson said Purdue Pharma gave its sales representatives incentives to sell large quantities of the drug and said the company took doctors on expense-paid retreats to encourage them to prescribe it.

Purdue Pharma Executive Vice President Paul Goldenheim rejected claims its marketing had been improper. "The is simply not the case," he said.

Goldenheim said the company spends significant time educating doctors about proper use of the drug.

He noted that the company worked with the Food and Drug Administration to strengthen warnings on OxyContin package inserts and helped law enforcement officials develop placebo tablets used in sting operations.

OxyContin is a slow-release narcotic painkiller. It is widely prescribed for victims of moderate to severe chronic pain resulting from such problems as arthritis, back trouble and cancer.

One pill is designed to last 12 hours, but those who abuse OxyContin usually crush the medicine and then snort or inject it, producing a quick, heroin-like high.

Hutchinson said the problem was most severe in Eastern and Southern states, but is spreading elsewhere. "I do not believe we've reached the peak of this problem yet," he said.

Rep. Frank Wolf, chairman of the Commerce, Justice, State and Judiciary Appropriations Subcommittee, said he would ask congressional auditors to investigate Purdue Pharma's marketing practices. Wolf, R-Va, said he doesn't want to ban the drug, but believes it can be more closely regulated.

¹ Nancy Zuckerbrod, Associated Press. (2001) "DEA Reproves OxyContin Maker." *Sun News*, Thursday 13 December, 2001.