

County program addresses teen cough syrup use

By CHRIS ROONEY
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Almost as if on cue, five students were hospitalized for overdosing on cough syrup right before the annual meeting of a grassroots group aimed at reducing harm from prescription drugs.

"This is an important reminder for us to have conversations with our children early and often about the potential harms of medications," Marin County Public Health Officer Dr. Matthew Willis said. "While helpful in some cases, medications, including those prescribed by a doctor, can cause more harm than good. This is not happening to just these kids, this school or this community. This is a national concern and we are fortunate in Marin to have supportive elected officials and a community that is aware, concerned and committed to action."

Willis delivered his message just one day after more than 100 people convened for the annual community meeting of RxSafe Marin, a grassroots community initiative dedicated to thwarting harm from prescription drug misuse. The urgency of the topic was driven home just one day later by the teen hospitalizations.

Three students at Tamalpais High School ingested too much Coricidin, found in cough syrup, and two

students at Drake High School overdosed on cough medicine at a school dance about a week and half ago. The youngest student was a ninth-grader; the others were tenth and eleventh graders. The students have been treated and released from the hospital and referred to counseling.

Coricidin, referred to as "Triple C" or "Skittles," is a commonly abused over-the-counter cough medicine containing the active ingredient dextromethorphan or DXM. When taken in large quantities, it causes a sensation that produces hallucinations and a sense of dissociation. The side effects of Coricidin abuse can result in vomiting, poor motor control, dizziness, impaired judgment and dilated pupils, seizure, coma and death, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. Coricidin abuse has been on the rise nationwide because it is easy to obtain.

At a news conference, Willis said there's a drug overdose death in Marin County every two weeks. Doctors are also prescribing pain medications at an unprecedented rate, Willis said, which prompted him to send out a public health advisory to every doctor in the county. The number of narcotics prescribed in Marin County doubled between 2004 and 2014.

In 2013, 27 people died of unintentional drug poisoning deaths in Marin. Willis said that statistic justifies calling the phenomenon an epidemic. At the RxSafe Marin meeting, he unveiled new countywide prescriber guidelines aimed at improving patient outcomes and limiting the risk of unintended harm from narcotics prescribed for the treatment of non-cancer pain.

Developed among several agencies, the guidelines are intended to be a tool for busy prescribers who face challenges practicing medicine in today's fast-paced healthcare system. A recent survey showed that Marin primary care providers operating under uniform guidelines are: eight times more likely to use random drug screenings; 12 times more likely to use a medication agreement, and; 17 times more likely to utilize the statewide computer database that monitors prescriptions issued to patients.

At the Oct. 20 RxSafe Marin event, journalist and Oxy Watchdog founder Erin Marie Daly spoke to a near-capacity audience about the loss of her youngest brother to a heroin overdose at the age of 20. Daly and her three brothers were raised in Marin.

"If someone told me five years ago that my brother would one day die of a her-



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More than 100 people attended the RxSafe Marin annual community meeting on October 20, 2015.

oin overdose, I would've thought they were crazy," Daly said. "What had happened to my baby brother? How did a tiny little pill shatter our family? When did we first begin losing Pat?"

As illustrated in her book, *Generation Rx: A Story of Dope, Death, and America's Opiate Crisis*, Daly shared her perspective on what the prescription pill epidemic means for today's youth, and the world around them. She commended RxSafe Marin participants for engaging in an initiative aimed at ending the local prescription drug abuse epidemic.

Marin native Susan Kim was asked similar questions following the loss of her son, Trey, three years ago

to a prescription drug overdose.

"If someone loses a child to cancer or a car accident, there is no stigma attached to it," Kim said. "When parents lose a child to a drug abuse, they feel like they can't talk about it. We need to break the silence about this epidemic. RxSafe Marin gives us the opportunity to talk, heal, and prevent this from happening to other families."

Dr. Peter Bretan, President of the Marin Medical Association agreed and encouraged providers to register with the statewide database, called Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System.

"Physicians are busy and need reliable administrative

support to help ensure their patients are getting the best treatment possible," Bretan said.

Willis said RxSafe members have been working with partners in schools and local coalitions to promote awareness around the issues of alcohol and drug misuse and abuse.

"Currently, RxSafe Marin is funded by general funds money by the Marin County Board of Supervisors," explained Maureen De Nieva, project coordinator for RxSafe Marin. "This community initiative is governed in partnership with Marin Health and Human Service and community residents/partners."

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