

Sales of oxycodone by doctors fall in Florida

February 2 2012, By Scott Hiaasen

The number of oxycodone pills sold by Florida doctors dropped dramatically in 2011, following a series of high-profile arrests and a legislative crackdown on the storefront "pill mills" that made South Florida the hub of a nationwide black market in prescription painkillers.

According to the U.S. [Drug Enforcement Administration](#), sales of oxycodone from doctors' offices and pain clinics dropped 97 percent from 2010 to 2011. Florida [doctors](#) sold almost 46 million oxycodone tablets in 2010, but only 1.2 million pills were sold by doctors last year, the DEA data shows.

The biggest reason for the drop: New legislation passed last year that largely prevents doctors from dispensing oxycodone and other [narcotics](#) from their offices. The state law, which took effect July 1, was aimed at hobbling storefront pain clinics, where doctors commonly sold drugs directly to walk-in patients paying only in cash. Many of these "patients" were really drug couriers from Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee and other states, investigators say.

Oxycodone has become the leading cause of [drug overdoses](#) in Florida, contributing to more than 1,500 deaths in 2010, records show.

Over the past year, the DEA also has increased the pressure on pain clinics with a series of undercover investigations leading to indictments of dozens of doctors and clinic owners around the state. Many more doctors have been forced to surrender their DEA licenses to write [prescriptions](#).

In 2010, 90 of the top 100 oxycodone-prescribing doctors in the United States were from Florida. But last year, only 13 Florida doctors were listed among the top 100 prescribers - and none from Florida were in the top 10.

At the same time, oxycodone sales were increasing among doctors in Kentucky, Georgia and Tennessee, the DEA found.

Pain-clinic doctors may still write prescriptions that can be filled at pharmacies under Florida's new law. But oxycodone sales from Florida pharmacies have dropped as well, by 14 percent from 2010 to 2011, the DEA data shows.

One large pharmacy chain, CVS, announced in December that it would not honor prescriptions for painkillers from some Florida doctors out of concern the pills could get diverted to the black market.Â

In recent months, the DEA has also focused its attention on rogue pharmacies, some of which have been working in concert with suspect pain clinics.Â

In October, for example, the feds filed drug-trafficking charges against the owner of the Robert's Drug Store pharmacy located in the Stephen P. Clark Government Center, the hub of Miami-Dade county government.

Last month, Daniel and Francine Sweet, the owners of the Focus on Health pharmacy in Plantation, Fla., pleaded guilty to money-laundering charges as part of a scheme to fill phony prescriptions for Miami-based drug dealers, court records show. The [pharmacy](#) ordered more than 1 million [oxycodone](#) pills in a one-year period, prosecutors said. The Sweets are scheduled to be sentenced in March.

"The arrests and administrative actions taken against the owner of pill

mills and rogue pharmacies, and the doctors and pharmacists working there, not only put these individuals out of business, but sent a clear message to others that the diversion of illicit pharmaceutical painkillers would not be tolerated," Mark Trouville, the special agent in charge of the DEA's Miami field office, said in a statement.

State officials recently launched a new tool to try to curb illegal painkiller sales and prevent "doctor shopping" by patients who go to multiple doctors seeking pills. In September, the Florida Department of Health launched a new prescription drug monitoring database that allows doctors and pharmacists - and, in some cases, criminal investigators - to track a patient's prescription history to weed out doctor shopping.

The database now contains data on 26 million prescriptions dating back to December 2010, according to a Brandeis University study of the program.

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