

Legal drugs or lethal killers

While it is well-known that Janis Joplin died of a heroin overdose and Jimi Hendrix died from complications arising from a cocktail of alcohol and barbiturates, what is often not talked about is that prescription drugs do as much, if not more, damage.

Prescription drug fatalities have overtaken car crashes as the number one source of accidental deaths in the US, according to Dr Sanjay Gupta of CNN. Every 19 minutes, someone dies because of too many pills.

It's much the same story in Australia, where one in five persons suffers from chronic pain. Above the age of 65, one in three persons suffers from it. And the drugs prescribed are usually opioids – derivatives of opium. The Australian newspaper, The Sydney Morning Herald, reports on a rising number of opioid-related deaths this year, a result of policies that cover medication but not other, more holistic longterm methods of dealing with recurring pain.

Scott Glover and Lisa Girion of the LA Times have done an investigative story on how a majority of legally-available-drug-related deaths are the result of prescriptions from a small group of doctors. They say "authorities have failed to recognize how often people overdose on medications prescribed for them by their doctors". Their investigation uncovered that 47% of legal-drug-related fatalities had a prescription as the sole or primary cause for the death and 0.1% of the doctors of four California counties were linked to 17% of the deaths.

One common cause of death was patients taking prescriptions from multiple doctors, like Lynn Blunt, a 46-year-old mother of four with degenerative disc disease. She visited a series of doctors and finally made her way to a pain treatment center in California. The doctor prescribed Fentanyl skin patches, a painkiller 100 times more powerful than morphine. She was found dead shortly after, and coroners' records show that she overdosed on prescription drugs prescribed by three doctors. High levels of fentanyl were found in her system. And yet, Blunt had been careful never to exceed the amounts prescribed to her.

According to Gupta, the biggest risk is the mixing of alcohol with painkillers. "As a doctor, I will look my patients in the eye every time I hand them a prescription to tell them the concerns about the pills they will take. It won't just be a casual reminder about not taking the medications with alcohol, but a forceful warning backed up with scary but forceful statistics," he says.

For more: latimes.com; cnn.com; smh.com.au



PAIN PILLS: Cure that kills