

The Winnipeg Free Press

Mar. 9, 2009

MDs, pharmacists battling drug resellers

By: Jen Skerritt

INNER-CITY doctors and pharmacists want the province to help them crack down on prescription-drug abuse in response to the growing number of people reselling addictive painkillers such as OxyContin on the street.

Betty Edel, executive director of the Mount Carmel Clinic, said the strip of medical clinics and pharmacies along North Main Street has become a hub for the resale of prescription painkillers. Edel said area residents and people from other Winnipeg communities are coming to North Main to fill their prescriptions and sell them to dealers who, in turn, sell the drugs for a steeper price on the street.

OxyContin is a strong narcotic that contains oxycodone and other opiates and is prescribed by physicians as a long-release painkiller. Some addiction experts call it "hillbilly heroin," since tablets containing oxycodone can be purchased for about \$5 a pill, then resold by dealers. Winnipeg police say about eight OxyContin tablets have a street value of \$150.

Last week, a group of about 30 inner-city medical providers met with addiction experts to brainstorm how to fight prescription-drug addiction in the community and learn to identify "drug-shopping" behaviour in patients.

Edel said the group wants the province to give doctors in Main Street walk-in clinics access to the Drug Programs Information Network (DPIN) -- a data-entry system pharmacies use to keep track of patient prescriptions. Right now, Edel said, doctors have no way of knowing if a patient has recently filled a prescription for a narcotic since drug-shoppers tend to hop from one doctor to the next.

The group is drafting a letter to Health Minister Theresa Oswald requesting the data system, and that the province fund more addiction treatment services in the inner city.

"People are getting prescriptions and they're coming into the North End and filling it," Edel said. "There's people in other communities who are making profit off of people's misery."

Sel Burrows, chairman of the Point Douglas Residents Committee, said the problem first surfaced last summer when committee members witnessed people coming out of clinics and reselling their drugs "several times a day." He said the government has a role to play to ensure reselling potentially dangerous medication isn't easy for people to do.

"Pharmacies have this (tool) but doctors don't," Burrows said. "Doctors have no way of knowing if a person has been drug-shopping."

Edel said many Point Douglas residents battle addiction, and part of the problem is the lack of treatment services. She said addiction feeds the community's sex trade and other deep-seated problems. Edel said the treatment services available to people are limited. It often takes months for patients to get into a provincially funded treatment program, which Edel said only causes people to relapse.

"We're serious about this and we need to do something," Edel said. "This is a real issue."

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