

Jump in narcotics prescribed dramatic

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THE number of prescriptions for potentially addictive painkillers like OxyContin skyrocketed after Manitoba Health agreed to pay for the drugs under Pharmacare.

A new study released Monday by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy found prescriptions for narcotics like OxyContin and oxycodone, an opioid found in drugs like Percocet, jumped dramatically after they were added to the province's Pharmacare program in 1999.

Researchers analyzed prescription data between 1995 and 2005 and found the number of prescriptions for oxycodone increased five times over the 10-year period. Prescriptions for OxyContin, also known as "hillbilly heroin", increased 95 times.

Recently, front-line addiction workers have reported an alarming rise in the number of young people addicted to powerful opiates like OxyContin. The disturbing trend has devastated families and frustrated medical professionals who say the abuse is propagated by the illicit resale of prescription drugs.

Though researchers didn't analyze the reasons behind the sharp increase in opioid prescriptions, the study speculates that doctors are more willing to prescribe narcotics to treat and manage pain. The study notes that reports of abuse of certain opioids may also be a factor.

"We saw OxyContin and oxycodone increase quite rapidly," said Colette Raymond, one of the study's authors, who is also a clinical pharmacist with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. "(The reason) is certainly an area for further study."

The use of medications like Tylenol 3 also increased after the powerful painkillers were included in Pharmacare.

Raymond said it's important to note that even after the increase, a very small number -- only .2 per cent of the province's population -- fill prescriptions for OxyContin.

The soaring use of the drug comes with dangers.

Deaths as a result of taking narcotic pain relievers have nearly doubled in 14 years, says an Ontario-based study released Monday. In particular, deaths from oxycodone rose fivefold between 1999 and 2004, immediately following the introduction of OxyContin in Ontario.

Most deaths occurred in individuals who were also taking sleeping pills or alcohol, said researchers involved in the study, published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.