

Ritalin abuse a growing epidemic among youth

KNIGHT-RIDDER TRIBUNE

PHILADELPHIA For years, parents, doctors and regulators have squabbled over the medicinal value of the prescription drug Ritalin and its ability to get distracted and hyperactive children to calm down and pay attention at school.

Now, they have more to squabble about: As use of Ritalin has exploded in the last decade, doctors and drug-control officials say the medicine's easy availability and its powerful stimulant effects are fueling a growing epidemic of drug abuse.

Wednesday, for example, police in a Philadelphia suburb arrested a young man who is accused of breaking into his high school's medicine cabinet last week and making off with hundreds of pills of Ritalin and Adderall, medicines widely used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The prescription drugs, stolen just as students at William Tennent High School were getting ready for semester exams, can be used both to stay awake all night or to get high.

The incident adds to a growing sense of unease about Ritalin abuse, especially among young people: While some swallow the

medicine in its regular pill form, others crush and snort it, or dissolve and inject it into a vein — producing both euphoria and addiction.

"This is a growing concern that all of us are getting increasingly alarmed about," said Anthony Rostain, codirector of the Pediatric Neuropsychiatric Program at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Rostain treats ADHD, sometimes with Ritalin.

"The most common misuse of this medication has been to sell it as speed or 'uppers' to help students stay up all night to study," Rostain said. "Most college students have been able to purchase them for years. Now we have begun seeing recreational use to induce a euphoric state. We are hearing about snorting Ritalin or Dexedrine."

The Drug Enforcement Administration classifies Ritalin as a Schedule 2 drug — the class of medical drugs with the highest potential for abuse.

"We are aware that Ritalin (abuse) is becoming more popular and there are investigations on at the state and local level," said Mary Vaira, a local spokeswoman for the DEA.

Much of the potential for abuse arises because children on Ritalin need to get a dose

while they are at school. "A lot of school nurses have pills for these kids, so kids who are older know that this Ritalin could be in the nurse's office," Vaira said.

In testimony before Congress last year, DEA officials said that between January 1990 and May 1995, methylphenidate, the chemical name for drugs such as Ritalin, "ranked in the top 10 most frequently reported controlled drugs stolen from registrants."

Between January 1996 and December 1997, officials testified, about 700,000 doses of methylphenidate were reported stolen, and "in 1998, there were 376 reported thefts from pharmacies."

In the most recent case, Warminster police Wednesday said David LaSalle, 18, a junior at the school, used small squares of wood to jam open the door of the nurse's office during a daytime visit.

At 6 p.m., LaSalle returned to the school and, while a girls' basketball game was on in the nearby gymnasium, allegedly removed the padlock from the nurse's cabinet and swiped 13 prescription bottles.

LaSalle was caught leaving by security cameras posted in the hall. Police later found one of the bottles in his bedroom, along with a hand-drawn cartoon about the drug

Adderall.

"He stole in excess of 300 pills," said Gary Gambardella, Bucks County chief deputy district attorney. "It's clear there was some intent to deliver, to spread these pills around."

Unable to make \$75,000 bail, LaSalle was remanded to Bucks County prison. He has been charged with burglary, criminal trespass, receiving stolen property, and theft. He also faces expulsion from the school.

The theft cleaned out the Ritalin supply at William Tennent High School just three days before semester exams were to begin.

"This could wreak havoc with some of these kids," said Debbie Moritz, whose son, a freshman, is on the prescription drug. "We got lucky," she said, because the family had an extra supply at home.

While the exact amount of abuse nationwide remains unknown, the DEA said that about 3 percent of high school seniors reported using Ritalin without a doctor's prescription in 1999, up from 1 percent in 1994. A 1996 survey found that between 30 and 50 percent of adolescents in drug treatment reported using methylphenidate.


James Manlandro, the medical director

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