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OXYCONTIN

DEANNE FLEET (Reporter): You may not know all the addicts, but the signs of OxyContin abuse are all over St John's. Government set up a task force to look into the prescription drug two months ago. Now its preliminary report says doctors here prescribe much higher dosages of OxyContin than anywhere else in the country. Health Minister Beth Marshall.

BETH MARSHALL (Health Minister Newfoundland and Labrador): After getting the report it seems like the fence is really around the problem, and I think that we really do have a problem.

FLEET: The report says doctors here prescribe ten times more forty-milligram pills and eight times more eighty-milligram OxyContin. Dr Susan King heads the provincial medical association.

DR SUSAN KING (Provincial Medical Association): To give any kind of a reason would be purely guesswork.

FLEET: Purdue Pharma makes OxyContin. In the US it's been criticized for marketing the drug to family doctors as a relief for moderate pain. But Purdue's Canadian Vice President doesn't think that happened. And John Stewart doesn't accept the report's finding.

JOHN STEWART (Vice President Purdue Pharmaceuticals Canada): The difference is, that we see in Newfoundland in terms of the higher strengths versus the lower strengths, while they are real, they are not what I would consider to be dramatic.

FLEET: Purdue offered to help pay for tamper resistant prescription pads to cut down on abuse here. But the taskforce says that may be only a short term solution.

STEWART: We're certainly willing to work with the province in moving forward on determining how best to implement a prescription monitoring program, electronic prescription monitoring program, or health record program.

FLEET: Six people died of OxyContin overdoses in this province. It's suspected in another three deaths on top of that. When you go to court, it's mostly young people in their teens and twenties you'll see addicted. It begs the question, how are they prescribed it?

KING: But it's certainly a question begs to be asked.

FLEET: The final report of the taskforce is due the end of March.
Deanne Fleet, CBC News St John's.