

## OxyContin maker joins fight

The Telegram (St. John's)

Monday, April 5, 2004

Page: A1 / FRONT

Section: News

Byline: Deana Stokes Sullivan

Source: The Telegram

As a recently established task force continues to grapple with the issue of OxyContin abuse in the province, the maker of the drug has begun its own investigation to try to get to the root of the problem.

John Stewart, executive vice-president and general manager of Purdue Pharma Canada, says the company is interested in stopping, or at least reducing, OxyContin abuse and plans to keep working with the task force and the province to find solutions.

The company is particularly interested in how the drug finds its way into the wrong hands.

"What we're doing is sponsoring some individuals who are investigative types to try to get within the known abusers and individuals and try to track back through how they got the drug, where the person is who gave them the drug and how it ultimately came from the legal into the illegal channel," Stewart said.

He said reports suggest several factors could be contributing to the problem, including double doctoring, where patients obtain prescriptions from more than one doctor under false pretenses; legitimate patients being prescribed the drug and then selling it for profit; physicians who are willing to provide prescriptions in return for money; patients tampering with prescriptions or stealing prescription pads to fraudulently obtain higher quantities of the drug; and theft of the drug from pharmacies.

Stewart explained that Purdue has a "very tight chain of control" when it comes to shipping OxyContin.

"We know exactly how much is going out," he said.

"It has to be ordered by a specific licensed, authorized narcotic dealer, by a wholesaler or a hospital, and then those individuals sign for it and verify the quantity when they receive it."

Stewart said OxyContin abuse appears to be a problem primarily in Newfoundland and Cape Breton. Other drugs are causing problems in larger centres such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

Why OxyContin is so popular in this province is a bit of a mystery.

Stewart said that, overall, OxyContin use in Newfoundland and Labrador isn't significantly disproportionate to OxyContin use in other provinces, although there has been a moderately higher use here of 40 mg and 80 mg tablets.

In 2003, Purdue sold 10,541 units of OxyContin (bottles containing 50 tablets each) to this province, an increase from 7,642 units in 2002. Of the 2003 shipment, 21 per cent of the bottles contained 10 mg tablets, 33 per cent had 20 mg, 30 per cent had 40 mg and 17 per cent had 80 mg.

Last year, the company sold 897,333 units of OxyContin in Canada, up from 589,906 units in 2002.

An overall increase in narcotic prescriptions in Canada in recent years has been attributed to physicians taking a more aggressive approach to pain management.

So far, Stewart said, sales of OxyContin in Newfoundland for the first three months of this year are 13 per cent lower than during the same period in 2003, but it's possible that's because the drug abuse controversy has caused legitimate patients to seek alternative medications.

Unfortunately, he said, the stigma associated with narcotics because of drug abuse may be intimidating for legitimate patients, even in terms of presenting their prescriptions to a pharmacy.

Stewart said there are questions doctors can ask to determine if a patient is abusing a drug.

There are also special doctor-patient contracts available to encourage patients to adhere to a specific dosage, have follow-up visits and be willing to go through withdrawal trials or lower dosages if they no longer need the drug or if they're showing signs of misuse.

Stewart said Purdue strongly supports education for patients as well as youth who might be at risk for drug abuse.

He said a person taking morphine, or oxycodone -- the main ingredient in OxyContin -- for legitimate pain can become tolerant of the respiratory depressant aspects of these drugs, but if someone has never taken them before, one high dose could be lethal.

These types of drugs, called opioids, can depress the part of the brain that keeps people breathing during sleep, Stewart said, and that's how the respiratory system can fail as a result of a high dosage -- something young people often don't realize.

"The thing that people always did in the movies was keep (people who had overdosed) up and walking around, because if you're awake, you'll keep breathing consciously.

"We don't stop breathing when we go to sleep because a different part of the brain takes over, but that's the part of the brain that the opioids depress," he explained.

Stewart said Purdue wants to keep working with the province to provide further information about drug abuse to the school system.

"We are going to work at reducing the demand, making individuals recognize long before they start down the path of abuse that this is extremely dangerous and not the thing to do," he said.

"How can we turn this thing from something that individuals who are 15 or 16 might think is a good thing to do at a party, to (having them) think it's a very bad thing to do?"

Stewart said making adequate drug treatment available is another aspect of the issue that has to be tackled.

"We do have individuals who are abusing and addicted, and it's a long and difficult path out of that, but we need to find a way to help them," he said.

Currently, tamper-resistant prescription pads are being considered in order to prevent people from changing the strength and number of pills prescribed.

The OxyContin task force was recently given a one-month extension to complete its final report, which is now due at the end of this month.

Stewart said he's hoping its recommendations will be implemented and a follow-up analysis eventually conducted.