

OxyContin maker begins investigation into abuse problem

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ST. JOHN'S, Nfld. (CP) _ The manufacturer of a highly addictive prescription drug has started an investigation into abuse of the drug.

John Stewart, executive vice-president and general manager of Purdue Pharma Canada, told the St. John's Telegram last week that the company is interested in stopping, or at least reducing, OxyContin abuse.

Stewart said the company also plans to keep working with a task force set up to look at abuse of the drug in Newfoundland and Labrador.

``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," said Stewart.

The executive said that Purdue has a ``very tight chain of control" when it comes to shipping OxyContin, which is usually used to control pain in cancer patients.

``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.

In 2003, Purdue sold 10,541 units of OxyContin - in bottles containing 50 tablets each - in Newfoundland, an increase from 7,642 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.

OxyContin, an opioid, can depress the part of the brain that keeps people breathing during sleep.

As a result, the respiratory system can fail as a result of a high dosage.

“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,” said Stewart.

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.