

# Task force aims to reduce overdose deaths

**By Jonathan Austin**

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Representatives of the Yancey Mitchell Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force appeared before the Yancey County Commission this week and pointed out some of the daunting statistics regarding the abuse of prescription drugs.

Pharmacist Mechelle Akers, the chair of the task force, told commissioners that the death rate for unintentional or undetermined poisonings due to prescription drugs in Yancey and Mitchell counties is "one of the worst rates in the nation."

The rate is calculated based on populations of 100,000, which can be confusing when reporting exact numbers for counties as small as Yancey, but Akers said Yancey County saw three overdose deaths in 2008, four in 2009 and six in 2010. In Mitchell County, six overdose deaths were reported in 2008, four in 2009 and four in 2010.

Data for 2011 is not yet available, she said.

"Both these rates exceed not only North Carolina's overall rate, but also those of our neighboring counties," Akers said.

"These are astounding figures," said Commissioner Marvin Holland.

Akers said the prevalence of pain-killer prescriptions is helping spur the increase in drug overdoses and arrests. "Seventy percent of persons overdosing on prescription medication obtained the drugs from family or friends," she said.

The flood of painkillers has swamped law enforcement. "In 2002, there were 102 people arrested in Yancey County on drug related charges," Akers said, citing sheriff's department data. "That number exceeded 800 people in 2011, according to the Yancey County Sheriff's Department."

John Williams, a licensed clinical addiction specialist and director of Angel Light Counseling in Burnsville, said he sees the effects of addiction every day in the lives of the people ordered to counseling by the courts. "Addiction to drugs is the largest problem our society faces, and legally prescribed medication constitute a large percentage of this problem. With the economy the way it is, people are more depressed and worried. They seek some kind of relief. They turn to something that alters their consciousness to reduce their worry."

According to the Center for Disease Control, 100 people die from drug overdoses every day in the United States. "Nearly three out of four prescription drug overdoses are caused by prescription painkillers-also called opioid pain relievers. The unprecedented rise in overdose deaths in the U.S. parallels a 300 percent increase since 1999 in the sale of these strong painkillers. These drugs were involved in 14,800 overdose deaths in 2008, more than cocaine and heroin combined," says the National Institute for Health.

"The misuse and abuse of prescription painkillers was responsible for more than 475,000 emergency department visits in 2009, a number that nearly doubled in just five years," the NIH reports.

Prescription painkillers are sedatives which slow down a person's breathing. "A person who is abusing prescription painkillers might take larger doses to achieve a euphoric effect and reduce withdrawal symptoms," the CDC says. "These larger doses can cause

breathing to slow down so much that breathing stops, resulting in a fatal overdose."

According to the NIH, those at risk are:

- People who obtain multiple controlled substance prescriptions from multiple providers-a practice known as "doctor shopping."
- People who take high daily dosages of prescription painkillers and those who misuse multiple abuse-prone prescription drugs.
- Low-income people and those living in rural areas.
- People with mental illness and those with a history of substance abuse.

Several studies show that those on Medicaid are prescribed painkillers at twice the rate of non-Medicaid patients, and are at six times the risk of prescription painkillers overdose.

Concerned Yancey and Mitchell residents wanted to address the abuse problem, and they formed the task force. Akers said the group is "a coalition of physicians, chiropractors, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, mental health counselors, educators, law enforcement, government leaders, church members, parents, media, health system administrators and community members whose main interest is in the prevention and treatment of substance abuse in our two counties."

She said the coalition has "sought to move forward many initiatives from all aspects in order to decrease substance abuse/misuse in our community. We are one of six coalitions in the state chosen to receive \$60,000 in grant money from the North Carolina Coalition Initiative (NCCI) administered by Wake Forest University. NCCI is funded by N.C. Department of Health and Human Services Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services. This grant will enable our coalition to further assess the needs in our community, formulate a strategic plan, build our capacity to effectively implement evidence-based strategies to reduce substance abuse, measure outcomes and put in place a structure for maintaining long-term coalition efforts." The task force is also working with the sheriff to develop a 'Jail Diversion Program' that helps keep non-violent offenders out of jail.

"We want to assist local law enforcement in reducing the number of non-violent drug offenders residing in jail for excessive periods of time," Akers said. "Instead these individuals may be a candidate for pre-trial rehabilitation. Ultimately this would reduce dollars spent on incarceration and give opportunity for individuals to seek recovery." The task force also recently hired Dora Smith-Cook as staff coordinator.

The local task force is modeling their program after a Wilkes County effort that began about five years ago when that community realized it was ranked sixth worst in the nation in overdose deaths. The Wilkes effort, called Project Lazarus, says it has seen overdose deaths drop 69 percent between 2009 and 2011.

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