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City & Local News

A painkiller that can kill

Abuse of drug OxyContin has become major problem in several eastern states



Theresa Meehan with photo of her granddaughter, Lauren. Lauren died after using OxyContin. (MARK LUDAK / DAILY NEWS)

by Nicole Weisensee Egan
Daily News Staff Writer

Eddie Bisch was preparing to graduate from Kensington High School.

He had applied to a culinary school and had dreams of becoming a chef or entering restaurant management, his family said.

On Sunday, Feb. 18, a deadly combination of alcohol and OxyContin, a pain-relief drug for terminally ill cancer patients, shattered his dreams.

Bisch, 18, died in his sleep from an accidental overdose of OxyContin, authorities said.

His death is one of at least 20 in Philadelphia since last November in which the drug was one of the contributing factors, authorities said.

"In six or seven of those cases, OxyContin was the cause of death," said Jeff Moran, spokesman for the city's Health Department.

Its abuse is becoming a growing problem nationwide. Last month, the National Drug Intelligence Center released a report calling its abuse "a major problem, particularly in the eastern United States."

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Elsewhere, 28 people in Virginia have died from overdoses of the drug over the last two years and another 59 in Kentucky, federal officials said.

Two of the Philadelphia victims were Bisch's friends, also 18, who lived in his Fishtown neighborhood, his family said.

Now, they want people to know how deadly the drug is when it's used to get high.

"I think the biggest message to get out is that it's not drug addicts on Kensington Avenue dying from this," said Bisch's aunt, Christine. "It's normal kids living normal teen-age years trying things and they're not getting a second chance to learn their mistakes."

James, 17, was Bisch's best friend. He admits he took OxyContin with Eddie the night before his friend died.

"I keep telling people that stuff kills you and you have to leave it alone," he said. "They don't want to listen - I guess like I didn't want to before. And Eddie."

OxyContin, produced by Purdue Pharmaceutical in Stamford, Conn., came on the market in 1996. It is sold in dosages of 10, 20, 80 and 160 milligrams. The 80- and 160-milligram doses are time-release tablets that deliver the drug over a 12-hour period.

It sells on the street for roughly \$1 a milligram, authorities said.

Patients who take it for medical reasons are supposed to swallow it with water. Abusers, however, are chewing it or crushing it before ingesting it, cops say.

"I'm told what makes this unique as a painkiller is that it's very effective and it has a very level dosage," said Inspector Jeremiah Daley, commander of the Philadelphia Police' Narcotics Division.

"It seems to be a substitute for heroin and they seem to be using it to get a more intense high," he said.

The National Drug Intelligence Center report released last month listed Maine, Ohio, West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, Maryland, rural southwestern Virginia and western Pennsylvania as having the biggest problems with abuse of the drug.

"A lot of it shows up in rural, economically depressed areas," said Chuck Miller, spokesman for the agency.

Edward Barbieri, a toxicologist at National Medical Services in Willow Grove, said anyone can die from it if they chew it or crush it and then take it.

"If you take enough, by itself, it can kill," he said.

Taking it with alcohol or any other type of depressant increases those

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chances, he said.

"OxyContin is a respiratory depressant and so is alcohol so you have the added effect," he said. "It makes you stop breathing and then the cardiovascular system stops functioning so your heart stops pumping and then you die."

It's only recently that the drug's illegal use has begun to seep into the Philadelphia region. Earlier this month, Gloucester County Prosecutor Andrew Yurick announced the arrest of eight people from Washington Township who allegedly faked prescriptions to obtain the drug.

U.S. Attorney Michael Stiles said his investigators are working on an OxyContin case but refused to elaborate. And Bensalem police are allegedly working on a case with the state attorney general's office.

Bucks County District Attorney Diane Gibbons called OxyContin's abuse and illegal trafficking a "growing problem" in the county, particularly in lower Bucks County.

While city police said they were aware that several people had died from accidental overdoses of OxyContin, they had not been notified that the drug was a factor in as many as 20 recent deaths.

Nonetheless, Daley said his division notified all cops to be on the lookout for OxyContin sellers.

"It's not one of those deals where we'll find an OxyContin kingpin," he said. "It'll be low-level dealers who have 40 or 50 pills to sell." In fact, it was one of those dealers that first brought the drug's illegal use to the attention of city cops.

About six months ago, Sgt. Mike Brady, who works in the 26th Police District, arrested a teen-aged boy who was selling drugs outside Adaire Elementary School at Palmer and Thompson streets.

The teen had 40 pills on him. Because he'd never seen the drug before, Brady took them to a local drug store to ask a pharmacist to identify them.

Once she told him, he called Lt. Christine Coulter, a commander in the Narcotics Division, and told her about the new drug for sale.

Since then, she's gotten a crash course in its uses and abuses.

"I only think it appeals to people who don't want to use a needle," she said. "They equate that with being a junkie or a user."

Daley said people obtain it one of three ways: "They steal it from a pharmacy, they have a doctor prescribe it for legitimate reasons and then sell them on the underground market for abuse purposes or they get it from an unscrupulous doctor," he said.

James, Eddie's best friend, said he and Eddie first tried OxyContin last summer when they bought it from a girl selling it in their neighborhood.

"We chewed it up and then drank something to get it down," said James, who said it's readily available at the local recreation center and local playgrounds. "At first it makes you feel hyper - then you down out and become mellow." He and Bisch - and many other teens in the neighborhood - began using the drug occasionally, he said.

On Jan. 13, his friend Lauren Meehan and her boyfriend's cousin died after taking OxyContin.

Eddie went to their funerals, said his father, Ed Bisch, 37.

But he and James still decided to split a 40 milligram pill on Sunday, Feb. 18.

"We just figured Lauren had taken too much," James said.

Shortly before midnight, Eddie Bisch returned to his grandparents' home on Cumberland Street near Memphis Street.

He was clearly drunk and went upstairs to go to sleep, said his grandmother, Maureen Bisch.

His sister went to wake him the next day at 1 p.m.

He was already dead.

His father said he hopes other kids learn from his son's death.

"They need to know it's like playing Russian Roulette," he said. "It can kill you easily."

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