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US: Shipment of Potent Pain Pills Suspended

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SHIPMENT OF POTENT PAIN PILLS SUSPENDED

Company Interrupts Sales Of Strongest Dosage of OxyContin Because Of Abuse

The company that makes OxyContin announced yesterday that it is suspending shipments of the most potent form of the prescription painkiller because of growing concern about lethal abuse of the drug.

Officials at Purdue Pharma LP, of Stamford, Conn., said the company won't sell the 160-milligram OxyContin pills while it works to prevent widespread abuse, especially in Appalachia. The 160-milligram pills -- which hit the market less than a year ago -- are much more dangerous than the more common 80-milligram, 40-milligram and 20-milligram pills, and doctors said that they could easily kill a first-time user.

"Abuse of such a high dose can certainly have some serious and dangerous health consequences to the abuser," said Purdue spokesman James W. Heins. "We think this action is the responsible thing to do."

The move comes just days before a scheduled meeting of the National Association of Attorneys General, at which officials are expected to discuss ways of controlling prescription drug abuse, especially abuse of OxyContin.

A statewide Virginia task force -- assembled by Attorney General Mark L. Earley (R) -- also is scheduled to meet next week specifically about the painkiller.

"Obviously, Purdue has realized what the attorney general and people of Southwest Virginia have known for months: OxyContin kills when it is used illegally," said David Botkins, Earley's spokesman.

OxyContin, a pain remedy approved by the Food and Drug Administration, was prescribed 6 million times last year. The painkiller recently has come under intense scrutiny because of its widely documented abuse. Medical officials in Southwest Virginia have blamed abuse of the drug for 39 deaths in the past three years, and local and federal authorities say its abuse has spread throughout the Washington region.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has asked Purdue to consider limiting how it distributes and markets OxyContin as part of the DEA's first national action plan for a prescription medication. DEA officials said yesterday that pulling the 160-milligram pills will do little to address the growing problem, largely because the high-dose tablets account for about 1 percent of OxyContin sales and rarely have been seen on the streets.

Tazewell County, Va., officials found 160-milligram pills in the underground market for the first time two weeks ago, when they seized almost 400.

In a raid on April 24, Tazewell investigators found almost \$100,000

worth of OxyContin pills of various strengths in a mobile home in Mill Creek.

"It really shocked us," said Tazewell Commonwealth's Attorney Dennis H. Lee. "I can't even imagine the damage those pills could do."

MAP posted-by: Jo-D

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