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282 deaths likely caused by painkiller

New York Times

Oct. 28, 2001

An extensive federal review of autopsy data has found that the powerful painkiller OxyContin is suspected of playing a role in the overdose deaths of 282 people in the past 19 months, more than twice the number in some previous estimates.

The nation's top drug enforcement official recently called the new finding "startling."

The review also found that virtually all the deaths were of people who swallowed the pill whole or crushed into powder, further suggesting that OxyContin misuse may be more difficult to curb. The overdose deaths previously were believed to have been of people who injected or snorted crushed pills, which are quicker and more dangerous forms of drug delivery.

Meanwhile, officials of Purdue Pharma, OxyContin's manufacturer, acknowledged in a recent interview that even after reports that OxyContin had been getting in the wrong hands, the company continued for a while this year to distribute free seven-day supplies of the drug, through doctors, to promote its use.

The federal study on OxyContin, by the Drug Enforcement Administration, is the agency's first to explore links between overdose deaths and a brand name drug.

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