

Prescription drugs need better controls

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Along with the usual concerns about taxes, government spending and property insurance rates came a new message from west Pasco's senior citizens to John Legg on the 2008 campaign trail: We're frightened.

They didn't need to look far for the source of their fear. They pointed to the middle-of-the-night home invasion robbery/homicide in Timber Oaks in late August that left 82-year-old Joseph Wido shot dead.

"It was eye-opening to me," said Legg. "A lot of our seniors in Gulf Highlands, Regency Park, they're just scared."

Eight days after Legg's successful re-election to the state Legislature came more tragedy. Sixty-two-year-old Linda Roma was killed when she fell and hit her head while struggling with a pair of purse snatchers outside the T.J. Maxx in Hudson.

Deputies made arrests in both cases that are unrelated on the surface, but tied together by prescription drug abuse. It is the reason, Sheriff Bob White said, that Francis Sicola was breaking into homes in west Pasco on Aug. 27-28 when he confronted Wido. The charges against Steve Anthony Cruz and Lisa Michelle Dillard, for their role in Roma's death, include obtaining a controlled substance by fraud.

Legg met with the sheriff. He talked with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. He looked at the numbers.

A 2007 federal survey found that one in five Americans older than 12 (50 million people) reported non-medical use of prescription pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants or sedatives at some point in their lifetimes. The same survey found nearly 7 million people (2.8 percent of the population age 12 or older) had used those same psychotherapeutic drugs for non-medical purposes over the past month.

They have street names like hillbilly heroin (Oxycodone) vitamin R (Ritalin) and ludes (depressants), but they are finding their ways from the back of the medicine cabinet where they have been prescribed for legitimate reasons to the street where they are ingested for recreational purposes. Prescription medications trail only marijuana in the drug of choice among teenage users.

Legg is proposing the environmentally friendly approach to try to curb the opportunities for prescription drug abuse. As an alternative to flushing unused medications down the toilet, Legg filed a bill in the 2009 legislative session modeled after efforts in the Pacific Northwest.

It's called product stewardship. Businesses that profit from having their products in the marketplace share some of the responsibility for collecting the unused portions from consumers. Think of it as recycling for prescription drugs except there is no intent on reusing the leftover pharmaceuticals.

The impetus elsewhere has been a desire to keep drugs out of the public water supply and from landfill leachate. Legg acknowledged that is a secondary consideration; his focus is curbing criminal behavior. Exactly how it will work is not yet determined. Legg's staff filed the bill late Friday and no bill number had yet been assigned.

Given Pasco's role in providing underground water for the Tampa Bay region, Legg said he may suggest a pilot program for Pasco and Hernando counties if it helps the idea gain wider acceptance.

In Clark County, Wash., for instance, a program has been in place for 12 years. Non-controlled pharmaceuticals are collected by pharmacies, and controlled substances are taken to the local police station or the sheriff's office where they are inventoried and then destroyed.

Oregon is investigating a program and looks across the border to British Columbia for inspiration where an effort existed for more than 10 years. In 2006, pharmacies there collected 44,000 pounds of unused medications.

In 2003, the legislature in Maine created a mail-in program to be administered by its state drug enforcement agency, then failed to fund it for four years.

Sounds like something Florida's lawmakers would do. The 2009 Legislature shouldn't let that happen. This is a pro-environment, pro-public safety idea that shouldn't be stuck on a back shelf somewhere like the drugs it seeks to eradicate.

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