

UTAH Health News

UDOH, Partners to Look for Clues in RX Drug Deaths

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The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) is about to begin a first-of-its-kind research project that will take an in-depth look at all fatal drug-related deaths over the next year. The goal is to find out why record numbers of Utahns are dying by prescription drug overdose and use those findings to design prevention efforts. Over the next year, researchers at the Office of the Medical Examiner will conduct as many as 600 interviews with family members of victims of drug overdose deaths.

"We'll be asking the families critical questions about the victims' lives prior to their deaths," said UDOH Executive Director Dr. David Sundwall. "We'll look at things like whether they were overweight, if they had a history of sleep apnea and any past substance abuse history," he added. "What we're hoping to find is whether there is a certain type of person who is more likely to die from a drug overdose."

The UDOH has support from the Labor Commission, and the Divisions of Occupational and Professional Licensing (DOPL) and Mental Health and Substance Abuse for the project. The partners will collaborate with the University of Utah Intermountain Injury Control Research Center in order to answer questions about two important problems in Utah: the epidemic of prescription-related overdose deaths and a high suicide rate.

"Although we are looking at two separate problems, there is a lot of overlap," says Douglas Gray, MD, from the University of Utah, "We need this data collected in order to develop viable solutions for these problems."

More Utahns are dying from unintentional drug overdoses each year than are dying in motor vehicle crashes. In 2007, 317 Utahns died from non-illicit drug-related overdose deaths that were classified as undetermined or accidental.

All the agencies involved in this new study want to help prevent these deaths. "We hope this collaborative effort amongst state agencies will help uncover clues to prevent future prescription drug overdose deaths," said Francine A. Giani, Executive Director of the Utah Department of Commerce.

Earlier this year, UDOH, with the support of DOPL, the Labor Commission and the Utah Attorney General's Office, launched the 'Use Only as Directed' Campaign to educate Utahns about the dangers of prescription drug misuse. The goal of the campaign is to reduce the number of unintentional prescription pain medication overdoses in Utah by 15 percent by 2009. For more information on the Use Only as Directed campaign please visit www.useonlyasdirected.org

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