

Internet Pharmacy, Drug Abuse, and What Pharmacy is Doing About It

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Justin Pearson (MN), Jani Merrill (UT), Ryan Haight (CA). These are all individuals that have died from prescription drug overdoses. They are all individuals who obtained prescription medications without ever having physically seen a doctor. And they are not the only who have successfully gotten prescription medications.

Justin Pearson, a resident of St. Cloud, MN, was first introduced to prescription medications when he was prescribed Vicodin for treatment of pain resulting from a back injury. After taking the Vicodin for a period of time, Justin began searching out other ways to obtain more of the medication. His primary source: the internet.

On December 24, 2006, Justin Pearson died from a prescription drug overdose. He was 24 years old. How was Justin able to obtain such large quantities of Vicodin without a prescription? Again, we turn to the internet.

Shortly after Justin's death, his family and friends began to advocate for tighter restrictions on what is now known as 'internet pharmacy.' They influenced the signing of what is lovingly known as 'Justin's Bill' to be passed in Minnesota state legislature. Justin's bill was crafted to crack down on drug trafficking of prescription medications on the internet. It does this by tightening the rules on what an office visit entails, billing of the visit and the nature of the term 'prescriber.' For more information on the particulars of this bill, visit: <https://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/bin/showPDF.php>

Since Justin's bill was passed, it has become harder for illegal internet pharmacies to function, by making rules for dispensing in all pharmacy settings more strict. Although this is an improvement, in an investigation of all internet pharmacies, the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) found that 93% of internet pharmacies still do not require a valid prescription. It is due to these internet pharmacies that individuals such as Justin Pearson are able to obtain medications without having seen a physician. This study also shows us that this is a tragedy that plagues not only Minnesota, but the rest of the United States, as well.

How can we stop this type of tragedy from occurring? Where do we find the resources to educate children about prescription medications? It seems a simple solution to consider the school system already in existence. Since 1983, children and teens have exhibited a decreased use of 'street drugs' due to the implementation of the D.A.R.E. program in our schools.

The Minnesota Pharmacists Foundation (MPF) took it upon themselves to create a program like D.A.R.E. to educate our youth about the dangers of prescription medications. What is the name of this program, you ask? AWA_Rx_E. Inspired by the tragic death of Justin Pearson, the program is not just a resource to teach children about the dangers of prescription pain relievers, it can answer many of the questions that patients have about pharmacy, and their medications.

Not only is utilizing the internet to get prescription medications without a prescription illegal, it's also dangerous. The World Health Organization estimates that up to 30% of all medications sold from internet pharmacies are counterfeit, or not legitimately what they claim to be. If patients choose to purchase their medications through these internet pharmacies they can verify that the pharmacy is legitimate, and meets all pharmacy code standards, by checking to see if the site is on the list of Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (VIPPS).

AWA_Rx_E is no longer just for Minnesotans, it's for the rest of the United States too. Recently, the NABP has agreed to take on the project and expand it from the tiny area that it serves currently to the entire United States. This way, AWA_Rx_E can help to educate all the children from the many walks of life about the dangers of prescription medications, in addition to their benefits.

AWA_Rx_E is not just a one-trick pony; it has other functions too. The primary goal of AWA_Rx_E is to call individuals to action to protect themselves and their children from the dangerous aspects of prescription medications. It is important to educate the public about the harmful effects of abusing medications, or using them without the consent of your physician, while still maintaining that prescription medications can be good, as well.

This year, their focus is on internet pharmacies and counterfeit drugs, but new goals will be established each year, to attain their mission: to provide individuals with the information they need to enable them to make the right decisions about prescription and over the counter medications, if they ever run across a situation that requires them to make one.

Other endeavors that they have undertaken include educating the public about how to dispose of their medications so they are not stolen and diverted and storage of these medications for the same reasons. They help to promote the help of the pharmacist, the most accessible healthcare provider, with the most knowledge about medications. The pharmacist can help individuals to determine proper medication practices, and collaborate with other healthcare practitioners to help give the best possible care to the patient. The website also provides a plethora of news, statistics, and resources for help, in order to 'save just one' so that fewer families will find themselves the victim of a tragedy that could have been avoided.

For more information, visit their website at <http://www.awarerx.org>

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