

Rec'd 8/11/93

June 17, 1993

Ms. Beverly Sopp
Managing Editor
Maryland EMS Newsletter
MIEMSS
22 South Green Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201-1595

Dear Ms. Sopp,

Please find the enclosed copy of my article Prescription Drugs: SUBSTANCES OF ABUSE. As indicated in our telephone conversation regarding this article I feel that this information can be helpful to the emergency health care provider. This is an area of emergency medicine that is rarely addressed; however, can have significant impact on the overall care of the patient.

Along with being a Maryland State Trooper, I have previously been a Maryland Certified Cardiac Rescue Technician (CRT) and am still a registered Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). I have experienced these type of problems and situations in both roles (Law Enforcement / EMS).

I would request that this article be published in the EMS NEWSLETTER for all emergency medical personnel to share. You may also wish to consider this type of training as part of a continuing education program. Should you have any questions or if I can be of any other assistance please feel free to contact me at anytime: (410) 586-3547.

Respectfully,



David M. Hammel
4735 Broomes Island Road
Port Republic, Maryland 20676

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Prescription Drugs: SUBSTANCES OF ABUSE
David M. Hammel

Substance abuse is a problem in Maryland that each of you, as an emergency health care provider, are faced with when responding to calls for service. You come into contact with a wide variety of people and their associated medical problems. There is one problem that is very prevalent in Maryland and is often "hidden" or overlooked, and that is the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs.

Prescription drugs are used everyday by many people for medical reasons; but, a great number of people illegally use prescription drugs in lieu of, or in addition to, traditional street drugs. These people obtain the prescription drugs from many sources: illegal street dealers, passing forged prescriptions, theft from a pharmacy, or visiting doctors under false pretenses and obtaining a "legitimate" prescription.

It is important for you to recognize this problem and be aware of the impact prescription drugs can have on a person. Prescription drugs are often utilized by an addict to enhance the effects of the traditional street drugs or to clear up infections associated with injection sites of traditional street drugs. Often the abusers of prescription drugs are at the "end of the rope", they have used everything possible to get "high" and that still is not enough.

When you respond to a call and the person appears to be under the influence of drugs, inquire with the patient as to what types of drugs they are taking and do a little investigating, so that your patient can be treated in the best manner. Look in the area of the patient for prescription bottles or prescription medications lying around. Check the bottles to see what dates the prescriptions were issued and by what doctors. If the patient has numerous bottles for the same medications, issued by different doctors, it may be a clue that the person has a prescription addiction. Ask the patient how many prescription pills they take a day, some addicts can consume a large quantity of substances without appearing to be under the influence. Check and see when the patient last ingested the drug and what it was. Some of the prescription drugs, XANAX in particular, can produce serious side effects as the quantity of the substance decreases in the patient.

If your on a call and the patient appears to be under the influence of some type of substance, look around and if you discover a prescription drug that you are not familiar with contact the Poison Control Center and ascertain what drug it is and any possible reactions or side effects. Although the prescription pills are in a bottle and they were issued by a doctor (excluding the illegal possession) they can still be abused and can create all types of physical problems. Just because the medication is in a prescription bottle it does not

mean the prescription is valid, needed, or being used properly.

I am not trying to insinuate that all prescriptions are bad; but, I am trying to give you enough information to allow you to look twice when prescription drugs are in question and to inform you that prescription drugs are abused and in a number of ways. In recognizing a patient with a Prescription Drug Problem, consider the following signs of abuse:

Signs Of PRESCRIPTION DRUG Abuse:

1. Traditional signs of drug abuse; slurred speech, inactive pupil response, sweating, disoriented, etc.
2. Numerous prescription bottles lying around. (Often in other people's names or containing a drug different than what is listed on the bottle.)
3. Prescription bottles in numerous doctors names for the same prescription and near the same time period.
4. Patient has significant knowledge of drug names and the treatment of a particular problem. (The prescription abuser is generally very well versed in medical terminology and can generally write a prescription as well as a doctor, if not better.)
5. Patient may have blank prescriptions, a list of pharmacies where they attempted to get prescriptions filled, or telephone books with pharmacies circled in their possession.
6. Patient may have numerous insurance or medical assistance cards in their possession, often the cards are in the name of several different people.

If you have any questions regarding the illegal use of prescription drugs or if you have any information regarding this activity, please contact your local police department or the Maryland State Police, Bureau of Drug Enforcement, Drug Diversion Unit, (410) 290-0050.

The author, David M. Hammel, has been a member of the Maryland State Police since 1985 and has been assigned to the Bureau of Drug Enforcement since 1988. In 1989 the Drug Diversion Unit was established and he was one of the initial members. He has a B.S. in Psychology from the University of Maryland and has attended many special training courses on investigative techniques and drug diversion. He has instructed and given lectures on Drug Diversion on numerous occasions and is a member of the Board of Directors for the National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators. He is considered an expert in the field of Drug Diversion. The views represented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views and position of the Maryland State Police.