



**Washington state Attorney General Rob McKenna talks about prescription drug abuse to an audience at Mount Si High School. (Photo by Laura Geggel)**

State Attorney General Rob McKenna shared some startling facts at the Youth Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention forum Feb. 24. For instance, about 700 people die from an accidental overdose of prescription drugs in Washington every year, he said. "Most often, people who overdose go to sleep and they simply don't wake up," McKenna said. "It really screams out for attention, but because the victims of those overdose deaths can't speak up, it's up to us to speak up to prevent these deaths."

The Snoqualmie Valley Hospital Foundation sponsored the forum in partnership with the Science and Management of Addictions Foundation.

Prescription drug abuse has been in the news with the deaths of Hollywood stars like Heath Ledger, who died from a lethal combination of oxycodone, hydrocodone, diazepam, temazepam, alprazolam and doxylamine, according to McKenna's Web site.

McKenna said he was prepared to attack prescription drug abuse with the intensity that he and the government targeted methamphetamine labs. When he came into office in 2005, McKenna said there were about 1,900 meth labs discovered in Washington. He noticed many of the children entering foster care had parents who were meth users.

He helped start a campaign that did three things: educate and raise awareness about the danger of meth, start drug treatment programs for meth users and prosecute meth dealers.

By 2008, only 50 meth labs were uncovered.

When he traveled the state talking to students about the negative effects of drugs, "they got it," McKenna said. "Meth scared them."

Unlike meth, officials face a new challenge when discouraging students from abusing prescription drugs.

"Attitudes toward medicines, toward prescription drugs, are different," McKenna said. "They don't view it the same way."

He said education and outreach are key to fighting prescription drug abuse. He has helped organize youth prevention summits, which children from the Snoqualmie Valley Youth Council and the Riverview Youth Council attended.

He also said he was working on a program that would allow pharmacists to track people who see multiple doctors and fill multiple prescriptions at different pharmacies.

After McKenna spoke, five other panelists shared their stories, including Seattle Children's Hospital Physician Rosemary Orr-Rice, who lost her son to a prescription drug overdose.

North Bend's Lisa Weidling, one of about 50 people who attended the forum, said she took 17 medications daily and worried about sending the wrong message to her son.

"I talk to him and tell him these medications are for me," Weidling said. "I tell him, 'What I take could kill you.' I don't want him to think he needs medications."

Snoqualmie Valley Hospital Emergency Room Physician Jon Halper said it is up to parents to monitor prescription drugs. Children may feel anxious and decide to resolve their problems with pain medications, or they may simply be looking for a high, he said.

"Parents aren't keeping track of how much was there," Halper said. "And things disappear and they end up at the playground (and) at Friday night parties."

**Local abuse**

Data from the 2008 Healthy Youth Survey shows that most Mount Si High School sophomores who used pain killers to get high were getting them from local sources.

Most students, about 82 percent, reported they did not use pain killers to get high. Of the 18 percent who reported they did use pain killers to get high, about 3 percent said they got them from a dentist or doctor, about 3 percent said they got them from a family member, about 7 percent said they got them from a friend and about 3 percent said they got them from a drug dealer, among other sources.

Some of these numbers are on par with the state average, but not all. Statewide, about 5 percent of sophomores got pain killers from friends and about 1 percent got them from a drug dealer.

Mount Si Associated Student Body President Zac Pearlstein said he knew of many students who popped medications, including some who took the painkiller ibuprofen before cross country practice.

"That's not a good habit to start, popping a pill before a run," Pearlstein said.

When he got his tonsils removed, his parents confiscated the bottle of oxycontin his dentist had prescribed, and only gave him pills in half doses, which was all he needed, he said.

He encouraged other parents to follow suit.

"My family is really good, they even lock up the Advil and Tylenol," Pearlstein said. "I mean, I got nothing."

**How to manage prescription drugs**

Keep prescription drugs in a secure location, like a locked box. Talk about the risks of drug use with your family and set clear rules. Dispose of unneeded prescription drugs by grinding them up and mixing them with coffee grounds or kitty litter before throwing them away.

**Getting help.** To help yourself or someone else manage a drug problem, call the Alcohol/Drug Help Line at 800-562-1240 or go to [www.adhl.org](http://www.adhl.org).

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