

Scientists looking for new painkillers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scientists are hunting new ways to help millions of pain sufferers — from addiction-resistant narcotics to using brain scanners for biofeedback — amid a worrisome rise in abuse of today's top prescription painkillers.

The good news: Only a tiny fraction of patients who are appropriately prescribed the most powerful painkillers — drugs known as opioids, including morphine, Vicodin, fentanyl and Oxycontin — ever will become dependent on them.

And scientists told the National Institutes of Health last week that those few who are vulnerable tend also to suffer such psychiatric disorders as depression and anxiety, giving doctors a clue about which patients need closer monitoring.

Opioids "are not dangerous if you know how to use them properly," stressed Dr. Nora Volkow, chief of NIH's National Institute on Drug Abuse. "We need to develop the knowledge that maximizes our ability to use them properly."

Amid fears that rising painkiller abuse will spark a backlash against pain sufferers, Volkow organized a two-day meeting in-

volving several hundred scientists and primary care physicians, to bring the latest science on pain and addiction to doctors struggling to balance the drugs' clear benefits and potential harm.

Some form of chronic pain affects one of every three or four adults worldwide. The government says one in 10 Americans suffers pain that lasts a year or more. For millions, pain is severe enough to be disabling; up to 6 million patients are on long-term opioid therapy. It's not just a question of suffering: Serious pain can actually worsen recovery from various ailments.

How many need opioids but don't get them? Those numbers are hard to come by, but "pain is really under-treated in our society," said Dr. Pamela Palmer, director of pain research at the University of California, San Francisco, who laments that the only way now to tell how patients are using painkillers is "making people pee in a bottle to see if the drug I prescribed is in there."

Under research now: —Pain Therapeutics Inc.'s Remoxy is in late-stage clinical trials to see if it offers an abuse-resistant version of oxycodone, the ingredient in Oxycontin. Oxycontin tablets are supposed to slowly dissolve for long-term pain relief, but abusers crush them and snort or inject the powder for a fast high.

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older first abused painkillers in the past year, outpacing new marijuana users. Some 415,000 people received treatment for painkiller abuse last year, Evans said.

So the hunt is on for pain relief that minimizes the abuse risk — not just for the 2 percent of pain patients who might become dependent, but to discourage theft or other diversion of the drugs.

"We really need to get smarter," said Dr. Pamela Palmer, director of pain research at the University of California, San Francisco, who laments that the only way now to tell how patients are using painkillers is "making people pee in a bottle to see if the drug I prescribed is in there."

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tamp down oxycodone's brain-stimulating effect, Palmer said, but one question is whether that also will diminish pain relief.

—Another approach now in early trials pairs technology with tiny tablets of a hospital-strength opioid, sufentanil, redesigned to dissolve almost instantly under the tongue. A computerized dispenser, the size of a remote control, is programmed with the patient's dose of Nanotabs and records how much is used and how often, information the doctor would require before allowing refills or adjusting doses, says Palmer, who is working with manufacturer AcelRx Pharmaceuticals.

Better would be drugs that more selectively target the brain receptors that react to opioids, blocking multiple ones at the same time so that it's harder to develop tolerance or suffer withdrawal. While that is still years away, an initial attempt worked in rats, and NIDA will push additional research to speed human trials, Volkow said. "That would be an amazing thing."

Then there's the non-drug approach: Omneuron Inc. trying to teach patients to control pain they feel.

South Florida dry

MIAMI (AP) — Crops, flower beds and golf courses will have to go thirsty after restrictions on water consumption were imposed on southeast Florida amid lower than normal rainfall.

The measures, instituted Thursday at a meeting of the South Florida Water Management District in West Palm Beach, are aimed at cutting the region's water use by 15 percent and more in some areas.

They come after more than a year of below-normal rainfall in the region, water officials said.

"We are getting some rain. The bad news is it isn't enough to make a difference," said Susan Sylvester, a director with the water management district. "This is really about making people concerned, making them aware."

The mandatory limits come as Florida growers head into the part of the year where they need the most water. They also come as the state heads into the two months of the year that are usually the driest.

Four counties on the lower east coast of the state will be affected by the restrictions: Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe and Palm Beach. About 5.5 million of the state's roughly 18 million residents live in those areas. The west coast of Florida is already under year-round water conservation measures.

The restrictions will be most severe in the area of Lake

Okeechobee, the main water supply for farmers in the area and the backup water supply for South Florida.

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White House enveloped in prosecutors' probe

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is being pulled further into the intensifying probe over federal prosecutor firings amid new questions about top political adviser Karl Rove's role and as GOP support for Attorney General Alberto Gonzales erodes.

President Bush's top legal aides were to tell congressional Democrats on Friday whether and under what conditions they would allow high-level White House officials, including Rove, to testify under oath in the inquiry.

Subpoenas could come as early as next week.

E-mails released this week, including a set issued Thursday night by the Justice Department, appear to contradict the administration's assertion that Bush's staff had only limited involvement in the firings of eight U.S. attorneys, which Democrats have suggested were a politically motivated purge.

Each new piece in the rapidly unfolding saga of how the prosecutors came to be dismissed has made it more difficult for the White House to insulate itself from the controversy.

The latest e-mails between White House and Justice Department officials show that Rove inquired in

early January 2005 about firing U.S. attorneys.

The one-page document, which incorporates an e-mail exchange in January 2005, also indicates Gonzales was considering dismissing up to 20 percent of U.S. attorneys in the weeks before he took over the Justice Department.

In the e-mails, Gonzales' top aide, Kyle Sampson, says that an across-the-board housecleaning "would certainly send ripples through the U.S. attorney community if we told folks they got one term only." But it concludes that "if Karl thinks there would be political will to do it, then so do I."

Sampson resigned this week over the prosecutors' firings and the Justice Department's misleading of Congress about the process.

The e-mails "show conclusively that Karl Rove was in the middle of this mess from the beginning," said Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y. "Every time new information comes out, it proves that the White House was not telling the truth."

Earlier Thursday, Rove said the controversy was being fueled by "superheated political rhetoric," adding that there was no similar uproar when President Clinton dismissed all 93 U.S. attorneys at the

beginning of his first term.

"We're at a point where people want to play politics with it. That's fine," Rove told students at Troy University in Alabama.

The White House said the e-mails don't undercut their account of Rove's involvement in the matter. Rove has a "vague recollection" that the idea to fire all 93 U.S. attorneys at the start of Bush's second term came from then-White House Counsel Harriet Miers, deputy press secretary Dana Perino said. "He thought it was a bad idea and would be unwise," Perino said.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has subpoenaed Justice Department officials in the probe. The panel will vote March 22 on subpoenas for Rove, Miers and her deputy, William K. Kelley.

One Republican, Sen. John Sununu of New Hampshire, has publicly urged Bush to fire Gonzales. Another GOP lawmaker, this one in the House and not ready to speak out publicly, said Thursday he planned to call next week for Gonzales to step down. And Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., said Thursday that Gonzales had lost the confidence of Congress.

Other Republican lawmakers are trying to quell the uproar until they

hear from Gonzales and his aides.

"Let's give them a chance to respond before we get tough," said Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, the senior Judiciary Committee Republican. "I'm prepared to get tough, but I want to get tough with a basis for doing so."

It's customary for new presidents to bring in their own team of prosecutors when they take office. Democrats say the Bush administration singled out some of its own nominees because they chafed at the president's priorities and Republican efforts to influence political corruption investigations.

"Eight U.S. attorneys who did not play ball with the political agenda of this administration were dropped from the team," said Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin of Illinois. "We have a right to ask what that political agenda was and whether or not it was a reasonable firing and dismissal."

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