

The evidence that harm indeed is being done soon becomes all too apparent. When local pharmacies run out of Percocet, Oxycontin, Xanax and Lortab pills and the coroner's office can't keep up with the calls for overdose victims, it's pretty clear the clinics are simply fronts for pill mills.

#### WHAT IS A PILL MILL?

In Paintsville, police were being inundated during traffic stops with citizens who were under the influence. In many cases, the suspects had prescriptions written by Dr. Albert, a physician at Care More Pain Management Center, said Jennifer Carpenter, branch manager of the Attorney General's Drug Investigations Branch. Soon, complaints started coming in from business owners neighboring Care More, bemoaning the parking lots overflowing with drug seekers, tailgating while waiting for their appointments and snorting pills outside their buildings.

These are just a few typical signs of the establishment of a pill mill in a community, Carpenter said. A pill mill is an operation in which a doctor, clinic or pharmacy prescribes and/or dispenses narcotics without a legitimate medical purpose. And in cases like Albert's, these doctors use their prescription pads to flood their communities with illegal narcotics. In his federal plea agreement, Albert admitted to unlawfully dispensing more than 50,000 oxycodone tablets into Johnson County.

These are not normal doctors, Carpenter said.

"Most of the time, pill mill physicians have action against their license in another state," she said. "Maybe they didn't get it taken from them, but they usually have some kind of action. So, these physicians aren't like your normal physicians. They just want quick, easy money. What they do is find a business owner, who is not a physician, to fund them to come in and

operate their pill mill. So, basically [the business owner] uses them for their DEA license."

When the doctor begins to see patients — a term used lightly in these cases — the drug seekers sometimes walk in with an old MRI scan and receive a cursory physical exam. In a matter of minutes, these doctors write prescriptions for large quantities of narcotics in exchange for an office fee which can range from \$200 to \$400.

For unscrupulous doctors hanging by a thread, it's a chance to make a lot of money — fast.

"It's a huge money maker," Carpenter said. "Huge. Think about it. They may have 60 people on a list to be seen each day. At about \$200 a person, if they see 60 people, four days a week, that's \$48,000."

Unlike a typical clinic, it is strictly a cash business. There is no insurance plan and no individualized treatment. If your pain could be eased with physical therapy or surgery, it won't be a treatment option offered in a pill mill. In some cases, physicians like Albert might not even bother seeing you on a return visit. According to his plea agreement, Albert signed blank prescription pads and allowed office assistants to write in the drug of choice for incoming patients.

"Make no mistake, this is the most predominate problem we have in Kentucky right now," said Roger West, assistant U.S. Attorney, Eastern District.

#### NOT JUST FLORIDA'S PROBLEM

Recent news has been flooded with stories of pain pill pipelines from the sandy shores of Florida to the far reaches of Kentucky's Appalachian mountains. With its lack of a prescription monitoring system in place, Florida had long been a viable playground for pill mill operators and drug seekers alike.

"I have a good friend who was a sergeant with the Broward County (Fla.) Sheriff's Department, and when our people started going down there, she would call and say, 'You guys need to keep your people at home, they are crazy!'" Carpenter said. "People were literally going to one hotel down there, an Econolodge >>

◀ In this surveillance footage, pill seekers gather in droves to visit an unnamed pill mill. Congregating "patients" is just one of many signs of pill mill activity at a pill clinic.

## Signs of a Pill Mill in Your Community

- No physical exams are given
- Only cash is accepted as payment
- Pain is only treated with pills
- Congregating "patients" in the parking lot
- Excessive traffic to and from the doctor's office
- Complaints from pharmacists about doctor's practices
- Large cash deposits at the bank
- Complaints from neighboring business owners about clientele
- Patients are in and out of the doctor's office in minutes ■

