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Gov. Rick Snyder unveils recommendations from a state task force to reduce the growing drug addictions and overdose deaths from prescription medications. Lt. Gov. Brian Calley said a strong database for doctors prescribing painkillers would be a big step.

DRUG DATABASE TOUTED TO CURB OVERDOSES

Task force recommendations aim to reduce addiction, deaths

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The Detroit News

The Snyder administration wants heightened monitoring of painkiller prescriptions to be the centerpiece of a state-led battle against the growing number of addictions and deaths in Michigan linked to widely used drugs called opioids.

Lt. Gov. Brian Calley unveiled recommendations of a state task force calling for increased reliance on the Michigan Automated Prescription Service to guard against unintended over-prescribing of addictive pain-control medications.

Doctors would have to report painkiller prescriptions they issue and consult the database before writing new ones under the proposals Calley presented at the Detroit Medical Center. DMC Chief Administrative Officer Conrad Mallett was a task force member.

The Legislature would need to appropriate more money to update the MAPS.

But if every doctor in Michigan were to sign up for MAPS right now, the system would crash, said Macomb County District 41-B Judge Linda Davis, a task force member.

The recommendations — ranging from a campaign to educate the public about the potential for accidental painkiller addiction to a proposed law shielding people from prosecution when they seek emergency help for friends who overdose — were greeted as helpful and overdue.

“Other states already are doing it and quite successfully,” Waterford advocate Jeannie Richards said about the proposed prescription reporting mandate. Richards has formed a group called Bryan’s Hope to push for policy changes in honor of her son, who died of a heroin overdose in 2011.

“I’m impressed by the breadth of the recommendations,” said Cynthia Arfken, a professor in Wayne State University’s Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences. “Expanding treatment

should also be included.”

A stronger reporting requirement for the Michigan Automated Prescription Service is envisioned as a valuable resource for doctors issuing new prescriptions for opioids such as Vicodin or OxyContin.

“I look at this as empowering doctors with information,” Calley told The Detroit News.

The lieutenant governor chaired a 21-member Michigan Prescription Drug and Opioid Abuse Task Force that since June has studied a growing prescription drug abuse crisis in Michigan.

“One of the most important things we can do is bring this problem out of the shadows,” said Attorney General Bill Schuette, also is a member.

Gov. Rick Snyder ordered the task force study and put Calley in charge because prescription drug and opioid addiction has led to a fivefold increase in drug deaths

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in Michigan since 1999.

Opioid analgesics or painkillers accounted for 1,001 or nearly 20 percent of the 5,062 Michigan deaths caused by “unintentional drug poisonings” between 2009 and 2013, according to state statistics.

Opioids are powerful painkillers that can lead to the use of highly addictive and dangerous illegal substances, especially heroin, Snyder said. They include drugs such as fentanyl, codeine and hydrocodone, or brand names such as OxyContin, Demerol and Vicodin.

Among its nearly three dozen recommendations, the task force calls for:

- Updating pain clinic licensing regulations.

- Increasing sanctions against health professionals who violate proper prescribing and dispensing practices.

- Limiting criminal penalties for low-level offenders who seek medical help for overdoses.

- Requiring added training in pain medication use as part

of continuing education for doctors.

- Boosting the number of drug-addiction treatment specialists in Michigan.

- Increasing awareness that state laws limit criminal or civil liability for emergency use of Naxolone, an injectable drug that reduces the effect of opioid overdoses and prevents deaths.

But the lieutenant governor cautioned against forming the impression the task force report is loaded with heavy-handed provisions.

“We have taken special care through all of this to make sure that this doesn’t hinder the ability of people to receive these very effective prescriptions for pain management,” he told The News.

There are recommendations, for example, to increase use of state drug courts, special courts that send lower-level addicted offenders to treatment rather than jail, and to have health insurers provide better coverage for drug treatment.

“We have to get past the idea that if a person is addicted, that is a bad person,” Calley said. “Addiction is a biological thing, not a willpower thing.”

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