Heroin abuse on the rise, local officials say

By Adam Foxman

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A series of recent heroin-related arrests in eastern Ventura County has come amid an increase in abuse of the drug locally and nationally, authorities said.

Heroin use and overdoses have increased across the nation over the past several years as the addictive drug became more available and some people abusing prescription painkillers began using it as a cheaper and more potent alternative, authorities said.

Last month, officials announced eight heroin sales arrests stemming from an investigation targeting dealers in Simi Valley and the Conejo Valley, and an admitted heroin dealer pleaded guilty to federal charges in the overdose deaths of two Ventura County men.

Addiction specialist Cary Quashen, founder and CEO of Action Family Counseling, said he's seen a major increase in heroin use the past two years. Action's 13 facilities include outpatient programs in Simi Valley and Ventura.

"It's becoming a nightmare right now," Quashen said of the drug.

Action's facilities get about 130 admissions a month, and about half of those coming in now are using heroin, often along with other drugs, Quashen said. That's up at least 30 to 40 percent from a year ago, he said.

Quashen said heroin overdoses also have increased, adding that he's been to six funerals in the past year for people who died of heroin overdoses.

While abuse of any kind of drug can be fatal, heroin can be especially risky because of the way people build tolerance to it and chase the feeling of their original high, he said.

"People need to use more and more of it just to be normal," he said.

"The problem is our bodies can't handle that, physically. ... You never really know the potency of what you're using."

During the 2010-11 fiscal year, 33 percent of people admitted to county drug treatment programs listed heroin as their primary drug, compared with 29 percent in 2008-09, said Patrick Zarate, who manages alcohol and drug programs for the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department.

Between early March and late April, five people died of heroin overdoses in Simi Valley alone, police said. Ventura County sheriff's officials also reported heroin overdose
Heroin-related overdoses and deaths increased nationwide as availability of the drug increased, partly due to an uptick in Mexican production of the opiate, according to the 2010 National Drug Threat Assessment from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Heroin abuse also increased in many areas of the nation "possibly because of increased demand among abusers of prescription medications who could no longer afford" the pills, according to the report.

While a heavy user might spend $400 a day on OxyContin or other drugs based on oxycodone, a semi-synthetic opiate, maintaining the addiction with heroin might cost a third or half of that, according to the report. The report also cited a more euphoric high with heroin that might draw people with a dependence on prescription opiates.

"They'll get the same high for a lot less money," Quashen said.

One woman who recently left one of Action's rehabilitation facilities had been taking 30 pain pills a day when she switched to heroin, Quashen said.

Rae Hanstad, a former Ojai mayor who works on drug prevention as a contractor for county behavioral health, said: "We are seeing that dangerous link between prescription drug abuse and the economic move over to heroin. It's cheaper, it's more available and it's often the fatal next stop."

The stigmatized image of a back-alley heroin junkie also has dissipated as more people smoke rather than inject it, and the drug is showing up among all walks of life, Quashen said.

"The scary thing is it's among the youngsters," he said, adding that his facilities are seeing a lot of users from 15 years old into their mid-30s. It was unusual to see heroin users in their midteens until a few years ago, he said.

Prescription-drug abuse among young people and the availability of powerful pharmaceuticals have been a focus of county prevention efforts in recent years. Many young people get the pills from home medicine cabinets, thinking they aren't dangerous because a doctor has prescribed them, officials said. Dispelling that myth is a top county goal, Hanstad said.

County officials have launched education programs, community forums and drives to collect unused or unwanted medications so they can't be abused.

Another forum on abuse of heroin and prescription drugs is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Sept. 27 at Newbury Park High School, 456 N. Reino Road. The event is sponsored by law enforcement, county agencies and the Conejo Valley Unified School District.