

Statement of  
**The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.**

United States Senator  
Delaware  
March 12, 2008

"Generation Rx: The Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs"  
Statement of Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
Joint Hearing in the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime & Drugs and  
Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
March 12, 2008

Good afternoon. Today, this joint hearing in the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs and Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control will examine and hopefully shed much needed light on an alarming trend that has crept into households and communities across America--the abuse of prescription and some over-the-counter drugs.

For more than three decades, I've been fighting the scourge of illegal drugs like methamphetamine and ecstasy, but I'm here today to tell you that it's not just the illegal street drugs that we parents and policymakers have to worry about. Prescription drugs can also be dangerously addictive and lethal.

One need look no further than the recent death of actor Heath Ledger, who died from an overdose of a lethal combination of prescription drugs. Less visibly, but no less tragically, prescription drug abuse impacts the lives of ordinary, hardworking families like that of Misty Fetko, who is here to tell the story of her son Carl's fatal overdose.

The nonmedical use of prescription drugs that caused these tragic deaths reflects a disturbing national trend: seven of the top eleven drugs most commonly abused by high school seniors are prescription or over-the-counter drugs. Vicodin and Amphetamines now rank up there with marijuana as the top three most commonly abused drugs among 12th graders. And, in 2006 more people started abusing prescription pain relievers than any other drug.

Finally, as you will hear from the Centers from Disease Control and Prevention, poisonings caused largely by prescription drug abuse are the second leading cause of death from unintentional injuries, second only to motor vehicle accidents.

In my home state of Delaware, the trends are just as apparent: in 2006, 20% of Delaware 11th graders reported that at some point in their life they had abused prescription drugs and 17% had abused an over-the-counter medicine. But this is clearly a national problem that is going to require a coordinated, national solution.

A key component to reversing these trends is raising public awareness so that parents, teachers, and communities recognize the real dangers associated with medicine abuse and take appropriate measures, like safeguarding medicines and talking to kids about the dangers of abuse. Parents need to recognize that if they see a prescription drug or cough syrup bottle next to their child's bedside or in their car, it might be cause for real concern.

Parents must consciously safeguard their prescriptions drugs. 60% of teens reported that prescription drugs are easy to get from parents' medicine cabinets, turning unassuming parents into their own children's drug dealers.

We've also got to fundamentally change the attitude of teens when it comes to abusing medicines. Teens have a misperception that because these drugs are easily accessible and legal when properly prescribed and monitored, they are always safe--in any dose. Nothing could be further from the truth. Abuse of prescription painkillers, for example, can lead to dependency, overdose, and even death. Abusing cough and cold medicine to get high off of its Dextromethorphan ingredient, or "DXM", which about 6% of 12th graders reported doing last year, can cause disorientation, motor impairment, blurred vision, nausea, rapid or irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, loss of consciousness, and death. Educating parents and teens about these facts is critical.

As is true with illegal street drugs, the abuse of powerful prescription drugs carries with it the potential for a serious addiction. Treatment programs must be available, affordable, and open to addicts with a prescription drug abuse problem. The most recent estimates show that of about 24 million Americans who needed treatment for an illegal drug or alcohol problem, only 10%--or 2.5 million--actually received treatment. This under-treatment epidemic is simply unacceptable and we've got to do a lot more to encourage all addicts into treatment.

I've been in this business a long time. What I've learned is that any balanced approach to fighting a drug scourge includes prevention, treatment, and enforcement components. The DEA must be given the tools it needs to shut down rogue, Internet pharmacies that are dispensing these powerful drugs without requiring that a doctor even see the patient--and I support Senators Feinstein and Sessions in this effort. And, while we've got to make sure doctors are able to prescribe these narcotics to those with legitimate needs, at the same time we have to do more to crack down on doctors who rubber stamp prescriptions for those who simply seek to abuse these drugs.

Moreover, Congress should pass my Dextromethorphan Abuse Reduction Act to restrict who can purchase pure, unfinished DXM and require that purchasers of DXM-containing products be at least 18 years of age. My bill, supported by my friend Senator Grassley, among others, would also robustly fund prevention and education campaigns around the country.

Since the issue came to my attention some time ago, I have worked to get the word out to parents and communities that medicine abuse is a real problem. Understanding that this is a serious concern is one of the keys to solving the problem.

Take my word for it: trends matter. We've got to get a handle on these abuse rates before they get worse. This hearing is a start, but we've got a lot of work to do and I would like to thank all the witnesses for coming to help jumpstart this campaign.