

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
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Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on "Generation Rx:
The Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs"
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This afternoon, we pick up where we left off last year with our second hearing in this Congress on the growing problem of prescription drug abuse. Last May, the full Judiciary Committee held a hearing on rogue online pharmacies that illegally traffic highly addictive painkillers and other controlled substances. Today, the Crime and Drugs Subcommittee examines a troubling and related trend in drug use - the rising abuse of beneficial prescription and over-the-counter drugs by American youth. I thank Senator Biden for holding today's hearing.

In many ways, prescription and over-the-counter medicines have made our lives better. Faced with countless illnesses and conditions each year, Americans of all ages count on these drugs to improve their health. When used properly, these medicines can improve extend, and even save lives. When abused, these drugs can cause harm, illness, addiction, and, as we will hear this morning, tragically, even death.

Earlier this week, 41 million Americans learned that dangerous pharmaceuticals - including prescription and over-the-counter drugs - may be present in their drinking water. I think all of us understand that even small concentrations of medicines, when not being used for their legitimate purpose, may pose serious hazards to our health.

I remain concerned about the dangers posed by the abuse of medicines in the growing number of circumstances where the proper constraints that doctors and pharmacists usually provide are absent. Too often nowadays these drugs are only a click away on the Internet or are readily available in the medicine cabinet. It should therefore come as no surprise that the abuse of these otherwise beneficial medicines has spiraled out of control. According to the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, almost six million people currently misuse prescription drugs. That is far too many.

Even more disturbing, an alarming number of teenagers and young adults are abusing prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines. Among young people, prescription drugs have become the second most abused illegal drug, behind only marijuana. That means more teenagers abuse prescription drugs than abuse cocaine, hallucinogens, inhalants, and heroin combined. Similarly, over three million teenagers report misusing over-the-counter drugs for a

non-medical purpose, which means one in every ten teenagers has used cough medicine to get "high." That is unacceptable.

If we want to reduce the high rates of medicine abuse, we must work to educate teenagers and parents about the realities and dangers of this serious problem. Too many Americans mistakenly believe that abusing addictive narcotics is a safe way to get "high." The truth is, when intentionally abused for a non-medical purpose, medicines found in the home are just as dangerous and addictive as drugs found in the streets. We need better drug education programs to make sure this public hears this message loud and clear.

The recent death of Heath Ledger serves as a harrowing reminder of the ultimate danger presented by prescription medicine abuse. His death should serve as a wake-up call alerting all Americans to the reality that prescription medicine drugs are not inherently safe. I hope that parents and children will draw lessons from his tragic death, and the deaths of many others. That knowledge will improve drug prevention, correct misinformation, and save lives.

I thank the witnesses for appearing here today, and I look forward to their testimony.

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