

Hillsborough bans new pain clinics, will regulate existing ones

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TAMPA — After the dirt bike accident, Kelly Rodda discovered a network of doctors who would supply him ever-growing bottles of pain pills. He'd wait in line for hours, \$200 in hand — cash only.

In the 90 days before his death in 2004, he scored prescriptions for 840 methadone tablets and an assortment of other drugs, said his father, Dan Rodda. His addiction would lead to his death.

"He had the gun," Rodda told Hillsborough County commissioners Wednesday. "The doctor gave him the bullets."

Rodda joined Hillsborough County sheriff's officials in pleading with commissioners to crack down on so-called pill mills, places that dispense pain medications to a growing number of addicts while asking few questions. Commissioners did so unanimously.

Hillsborough County became the latest local government trying to crack down on pain-management clinics by requiring them to register and setting rules for their operation. Pinellas County and the city of Tampa have also pursued local regulation in advance of a state law taking effect in October.

The efforts are a response to an increased understanding of the growing abuse of pain medication. Sheriff's officials told commissioners that far more people die of prescription painkiller abuse than from illicit drugs — two to five people weekly in Hillsborough County.

"They're the new crack cocaine of this generation," sheriff's Maj. Donna Luszczynski said.

Pain-management clinics have sprung up in recent years throughout Florida to meet a growing demand. While some are legitimate, others are part of a growing trade in prescription pain medication, attracting operators from states that have already cracked down.

There are 73 pain-management clinics in Hillsborough County, and many others are believed to be operating without registering with the Florida Department of Health, said Chris Brown, legal counsel to the sheriff.

The emergency Hillsborough ordinance bans new clinics that focus largely on dispensing pain pills from opening after June 15, until the new state law regulating their operation takes effect in October. It also includes stringent new rules and registration requirements for existing clinics that local officials say will stay in place after the state law goes into effect.

Clinic operators will have to pay a \$1,500 application fee to continue operating. As part of the application, owners will have to submit criminal background checks on all employees or volunteers and disclose the name of a physician responsible for any prescriptions.

There will be an additional \$1,500 annual registration fee and new rules governing things such as hours of operation.

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