

CONNECTICUT

Prescription Errors Stir Debate

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Bill Would Require Mistakes To Be Reported

Steps must be taken, lawmakers and pharmacists agree, to halt prescription errors such as the one that killed a Southington woman last June. How best to achieve that goal, however, is at the core of an intensifying debate.

Mandating the reporting of prescription errors — as a bill being raised in the state legislature's general law committee proposes — is the wrong way to get at the problem, say those representing the state's pharmacists and drug store chains. Supporters of the change, while recognizing the regulation is not a cure-all, say action is needed now and passing the bill is a start.

Players on both sides are scheduled to face off at a legislative hearing Tuesday. The bill's sponsor, state Sen. Thomas Colapietro, a Democrat whose 31st District includes Southington, hopes the recent publicity surrounding Donna Marie Altieri's death will give the bill momentum, even during a short session when bills changing policy are discouraged.

"Unfortunately, things like this get a lot more attention when something happens," said Colapietro, a champion of consumer rights best known for his sponsorship of a law regulating telemarketers.

Opponents of the measure argue the regulation would be difficult to enforce and would make pharmacists reluctant to report errors. Colapietro called such reasoning "weak."

"What's different?" he said. "Right now they're not required to [report mistakes] and they don't and someone died."

The issue took on new urgency when Altieri's sons, Daren and Derek, went public with her story. Upset with the way the state and a drug store chain handled her death, the brothers mounted a crusade to change the system. The lack of mandatory reporting, they say, left them not knowing what killed their

mother.

Donna Marie, 51, was suffering from chronic diarrhea. An emergency room doctor at Bradley Memorial Hospital said she died of a heart attack. Skeptical of that conclusion, however, Daren Altieri requested an autopsy, which determined the cause of death to be an overdose of morphine later linked to a mistaken prescription.

Pharmacy professionals say such error-related deaths are rare. Prescription errors, they acknowledge, are not uncommon, and an industry task force in the state has been looking at ways to address the problem for more than five years, says Margherita Giuliano, executive vice president of the Connecticut Pharmacists Association, a group representing community pharmacists and pharmacy technicians.

Quality assurance measures, not mandatory reporting of errors, would do more to reduce pharmaceutical mistakes, Giuliano and other industry advocates say.

"We really don't know that mandatory reporting is enforceable or that it would prevent errors," Giuliano said. "Looking at where the system might be breaking down and what could be added to prevent errors" would be more effective.

Pharmacy professionals are quick to say that no other state requires pharmacists to report mistakes. Opposition to mandatory reporting of errors, however, is not universal among professionals.

"I think it's extremely important that if

there is an error, the circumstances surrounding the error need to be known," said Gerald Bowman, a retired hospital pharmacist and past president of the Connecticut Society of Hospital Pharmacists. "Any reporting that causes someone to sit down and say, 'How did this error happen and what went wrong in our system?' is good. Any error is embarrassing, but we have to put safeguards in place to make sure it never happens again."

Michael D'Amico, a Watertown lawyer representing the Altieri family, questioned whether the bill — which also calls for pharmacists who make mistakes to attend an extra 15 hours of continuing education — goes far enough. Notification of consumers should be mandated, D'Amico said, and information telling consumers who to contact in case of an error should be posted in every pharmacy.

"The problem here is that no one is aware of this huge, huge problem that keeps getting swept under the rug," D'Amico said. "Frankly, it's about time some state had the courage to pass something so there is a standard to follow. The hope would be that other states would follow suit, but there should be some federal legislation to provide uniform application."

Setting pharmacy procedures now is left up to the individual pharmacist or pharmacy company. Implementing a single protocol is difficult, Giuliano said, because of the array of pharmacy operations, which range from hospital pharmacies to chains, to the pharmacies located in grocery stores.

"It is difficult to standardize for one what will work for all, but because we are professional we are concerned about errors, so we set our own protocols," Giuliano said. "Every pharmacist has their own unique way of double or triple checking."

Tuesday's hearing is slated for 1 p.m. in Room 1A of the Legislative Office Building in Hartford.