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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2002

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Tighter Pharmacy Rules Urged

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Spurred by a 51-year-old Southington woman's death from an improperly filled prescription, a state lawmaker moved Wednesday to close a "glaring gap" in state rules for pharmacies.

State Sen. Thomas Colapietro, a Plymouth Democrat whose 31st District includes Southington, said he plans to raise a bill in the legislature's general law committee that would require pharmacists to report errors to the state Department of Consumer Protection.

Fatal Prescription Error Prompts Calls By Lawmakers For Stricter Regulation

"I find it utterly amazing that with all the checks and balances we have in place to regulate our health care industry and protect our citizens from harm, that this reporting loophole still exists in the area of pharmaceuticals," said Colapietro, who heads the general law committee. "I understand that these errors are extremely rare, but there must be a means through which an error can be traced and responsibly assigned."

The number of prescription errors is uncertain, since pharmacies are not required to report errors to the state. The cause of Donna Marie Altieri's death last June from an overdose of morphine was uncovered only after one of her sons, doubtful of an emergency room physician's conclusion that she died of a heart attack, requested an autopsy.

The state Commission on Pharmacy and Southington police are in-

vestigating the case, which authorities believe is the first known death in the state from a botched prescription.

The incident dramatically underscores the importance of closing the loophole sooner than later, lawmakers said.

"It's just horrible," said state Sen. Mary Ann Handley, a Manchester Democrat who co-sponsored a bill similar to Colapietro's last week in the legislature's public health committee.

"We all have such faith in our druggist," Handley said. "The local druggist is the most admired and respected

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of professionals, and to have this kind of thing happen is just devastating.”

The legislature has been looking at the issue of medical mistakes for years, said state Rep. Christopher Murphy, D-Southington, but the focus, until now, has been on physicians.

“This is evidence that pharmaceutical errors can be just as deadly,” Murphy said.

The number of prescriptions filled across the nation has skyrocketed over the past few years, rising from 1.9 billion in 1994 to 2.8 billion in 1999. The total is expected to reach 4 billion a year by 2004. At the same time, pharmacists are stretched thin across the state and na-

tion.

Crafting a bill with teeth during a short session will be a “yeoman’s task,” Murphy said, “but I’ve seen legislators take action when they want to.”

“Faced with this kind of deadly incident,” he said, “we should get serious about this.”

With a prescription from a Meriden doctor, Altieri went to a CVS pharmacy near her home in Southington last June 14, seeking relief from chronic diarrhea. Instead of giving her the camphorated tincture of opium the doctor ordered, however, the pharmacist mistakenly gave her opium tincture, a more potent remedy for diarrhea with 25 times as much morphine.

Altieri died late the next day, hours after taking her first and only dose of the medication. Pharmacy officials have acknowledged the error, but blame it on the doctor, who they said caused the con-

fusion by not using the more common name of the medicine — paregoric.

The pharmacist has been placed on administrative duty pending the outcome of the case. Daren and Derek Altieri, Donna Altieri’s sons, are preparing a civil suit and pushing for regulatory changes.

Requiring pharmacists to report errors will not necessarily prevent errors in the future, Murphy said, “but the family is right to be concerned. We should at least be able to tell where the errors are happening more frequently.”

“This is a glaring gap in the law,” said state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, who said he plans to pursue the issues raised by the case with legislators, officials from the consumer protection department — which oversees pharmacies — and pharmacy professionals. “It is a defect in the law that certainly was dramatized by the report today.”