

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of February 20, 2012 – Prescription Medication and its Deadly Effects

Last week, the Entertainment World was shocked by the sudden and unexpected loss of one of its elite. As Hollywood was getting ready to host the Grammy awards, singing sensation, Whitney Houston, was found dead in her hotel bathtub. While the initial belief was that her death was an accidental drowning, subsequent investigations suggested otherwise, as a plethora of sedatives including Lorazepam, Valium, Xanax and sleeping medication was found in her hotel room.

Although the toxicology examination is expected to take weeks to complete, experts in the field of accidental death agree that Ms. Houston's casualty could not have been due solely to drowning (i.e. falling asleep in the bathtub), as the natural biologic function of involuntary breathing would have woken her. Only some form of external influence could have caused her to remain underwater without being shocked into consciousness. Houston was seen drinking heavily at the hotel bar with friends the night before her death. The possibility of her mixing alcohol with Xanax could have produced heavy sedation, either causing her death directly from acute drug intoxication or fall unconscious, suppressing the body's natural demand for breathing and slip underwater, drowning.

Within recent years we have witnessed many celebrities die due to drug use – or rather drug abuse. The specific drugs in question are not of the illegal street recreational variety, but rather prescription medications which, all too often, are taken in conjunction with alcohol. Amy Winehouse, Brittany Murphy, Heath Ledger, and, of course, Michael Jackson were unfortunate statistics to this phenomenon, and according to all the latest information and data collected by health organizations throughout the country, such occurrences are reaching epidemic proportions.

Misuse of prescription medication is not just confined to the celebrities, but has become an alarming practice within all walks of life in today's society. According to data from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), it has been estimated that half of all Americans take at least one prescription drug, with one in six taking three or more medications. The most commonly used types of drugs include: asthma medicines for children, central nervous system stimulants for adolescents, antidepressants for middle-aged adults and cholesterol lowering drugs for older Americans.

“People may be taking too many drugs — that's a big concern in the older age groups,” said Dr. Qiuping Gu, a leading epidemiologist within the field of prescription drug use. “When you see such a big percentage taking five or more drugs, side effects and safety become very serious issues.”

Accidental death from prescription drugs, even when they are correctly given, is now the fourth leading cause of death in the U.S. Before you pop another prescription pill, think carefully. Just because your doctor prescribed it that is no guarantee you'll benefit from it or even emerge unscathed from the experience. That prescription pill could be hazardous to your health - and life.

In Aldous Huxley's classic novel, *Brave New World*, future society is maintained through the use of the drug, soma; developed as a self-medicating comfort mechanism in the face of stress and discomfort. It seems that what was once considered to be a far-fetched futuristic tale about human-dependency on drugs to help us cope with our everyday life, if not already here, may not be too far away.

Prescription drug abuse means taking a prescription medication that is not prescribed for you, or taking it for reasons or in dosages other than as prescribed. Abuse of prescription drugs can produce serious health effects, including addiction. Commonly abused classes of prescription medications include opioids (for pain), central nervous system depressants (for anxiety and sleep disorders), and stimulants (for ADHD and narcolepsy). Opioids include hydrocodone (Vicodin®), oxycodone (OxyContin®), propoxyphene (Darvon®), hydromorphone (Dilaudid®), meperidine (Demerol®), and diphenoxylate (Lomotil®). Central nervous system depressants include barbiturates such as pentobarbital sodium (Nembutal®), and benzodiazepines such as diazepam (Valium®) and alprazolam (Xanax®). Stimulants include dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine®), methylphenidate (Ritalin® and Concerta®), and amphetamines (Adderall®).

Long-term use of opioids or central nervous system depressants can lead to physical dependence and addiction. Opioids can produce drowsiness, constipation and, depending on amount taken, can depress breathing. Central nervous system depressants slow down brain function; if combined with other medications that cause drowsiness or with alcohol, heart rate and respiration can slow down dangerously (The CNS depressant, Xanax was found in Ms. Houston's hotel room). Taken repeatedly or in high doses, stimulants can cause anxiety, paranoia, dangerously high body temperatures, irregular heartbeat, or seizures. In addition, taking these medications with alcohol greatly increases the risk of other serious conditions, including death, as was probably the case with Whitney Houston.

So what are our alternatives? Are we to completely forsake medication that has been prescribed to us so that we cannot cope with our ailments? The facts clearly show that the problem is not the prescription medications we take, but rather how we take them. It is unfortunate but too often people rely on medication as a crutch, instead of moderate use or per their doctor's instructions. Once it is discovered that a little bit provides some benefit, it is assumed that more will increase those benefits. Also, we have a tendency to mix our prescription medicine with over-the-counter aids or even alcohol. There is a misconception that because these substances are commonplace and uncontrolled, they are harmless and therefore there is no need to examine their possible effects. If we take to heart the tragedies of Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson and those countless other victims, maybe their deaths can serve as a warning and prevent further misfortunes. In that respect, the mournful losses of some of our heroes (as well as our children's role models) would not be in vain.

Nothing is likely to help a person overcome or endure troubles than the consciousness of having a task in life. ~ Victor Frankl (Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor)