

Codeine abuse abounds in Houston

By Greg A. Bedard of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: July 11, 2009

Green Bay — Some time ago, Houston was dubbed "The City of Syrup." It has nothing to do with the maple variety.

Thanks to low prices, relatively easy accessibility and the social approval of a burgeoning hip-hop scene, Houston found itself in the midst of a rapid rise of codeine abuse among its youths in the 1990s. That Green Bay Packers defensive end Johnny Jolly, a Houston native, is set to go on trial this week on charges he possessed between 200 and 400 grams of codeine shows the habit has not yet been kicked.

"Yes, it's still a serious problem here," said Ron Peters, a professor at the University of Texas School of Public Health in Houston who has done extensive studies about codeine abuse. "The (usage) numbers aren't where they were three or four years ago, but amongst minority populations, they are still high."

Jolly was arrested July 8, 2008, outside a Houston nightclub after officers smelled codeine in a soda bottle and two Styrofoam cups filled with ice that were in Jolly's car.

Familiar story

Those facts of the case are all too familiar to Peters.

"No, it doesn't surprise me at all," Peters said. "This particular drug has been normalized. It has high social approval here in Houston. In fact, the thing with the Styrofoam cups, that's usually the way it's used and you have other things you put into it. People have some soda, they may even put candy at the bottom."

Known as Purple Drank, Lean or Sizzurp, mixing cough suppressant containing codeine and promethazine rose to prominence in Houston in the 1990s as its abuse was diffused in a form of hip-hop called "Screw Music."

In the rap sub-genre developed by the late D.J. Screw, original hip-hop songs are slowed down to give the music a more hypnotic feel and mimic drug abuse. High levels of codeine, which is an opiate derivative like heroin, produces a dissociative state and an erosion of motor skills. Users often can't stand up, causing them to lean.

It didn't take long for codeine abuse to spread all over the country as the likes of Kanye West, Lil' Wayne and the Academy Award-winning Three 6 Mafia praised the abuse in songs.

Targeting the problem

In places like northeast Houston, the section where Jolly grew up, research done by Peters and others pegged the usage rate among youths in the early 2000s - when Jolly was starring at Forest Brook High School - at upwards of 40%. Usage didn't dwindle after the deaths of Screw, a.k.a. Robert Earl Davis Jr., and two other popular Texas hip-hop figures, Big Moe and Pimp C, were linked to codeine.

Peters said the numbers had finally gone down in recent years after stepped-up enforcement efforts by Harris County and the Drug Enforcement Agency have helped the price on the street go from \$100 for a bottle to \$350.

"It's gotten so bad that other pharmacists have stopped carrying it, or if they do have it and they feel uncomfortable (with the buyer), they'll say they don't have it because it just seems to be a shopping item, so to speak," said Jay Hayes, a pharmacy professor at the University of Houston. Jolly is not the first NFL player to be arrested in connection with codeine.

Terrence Kiel, a second-round pick of San Diego Chargers in 2003, was arrested in 2006 for trying to ship 15 one-pint bottles of codeine-based syrup back to his hometown of Lufkin, Texas. Kiel pleaded guilty in the federal case and had to do 175 hours of community service. Kiel was a teammate of Jolly's at Texas A&M in 2002. Kiel died in a single-car crash last July, four days before Jolly's arrest.