

## Over-the-counter attack on meth

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The fire hoses had been rolled up.

The 11-year-old burn victim had been taken to the hospital.

And Jefferson County's Sgt. Gary Higginbotham was left shaking his head as he surveyed the scene of the methamphetamine lab explosion.



Kentucky drug agent Brian Lewis (left) asks pharmacists Britney Morgan and Leslie Rogers, in London, Ky., in January, about people who may have illegally purchased pseudoephedrine

( J.B. Forbes/P-D)

He knew that, in other states, authorities could have quickly caught the Festus homeowners' illegal purchases of a key ingredient to make meth.

But not here — not in the heart of America's fight against meth labs.

Missouri has long led the nation in meth lab busts. Illinois hasn't been far behind. Yet neither state has adopted stricter laws for obtaining meth's key ingredient, pseudoephedrine. The laws are credited with helping Oklahoma and Oregon see the biggest declines of meth labs of any states.

Had the Festus couple tried to buy pseudoephedrine illegally in Oklahoma, clerks would have refused the sale.

In Oregon, the purchase would have required multiple doctors and prescriptions.

But in Missouri and Illinois, all the addicts had to do was sign paper logs that are often too cumbersome for police to check.

Missouri is set to strengthen oversight, but police worry meth cooks will cross state lines to buy supplies. So does Missouri Rep. Jeff Roorda, D-Barnhart, who is pushing for a tougher law.

"I shudder to think what people are going to say 20 years from now as to why we didn't eliminate this problem," Roorda said.

Awaiting reform, Jefferson County officers have struggled to keep up with a list of who exceeds the limit.

"She was on the list," Higginbotham said, his eyebrows rising in frustration as he put chemicals removed from the charred basement into his truck. "And it's sad because by the time we get to them, the meth is already made or something like this happens."

#### LISTS SIT UNCHECKED

Higginbotham led the county's drug unit when Congress passed a 2005 law limiting pseudoephedrine purchases to 9 grams every 30 days. That's roughly two 15-dose boxes of 24-hour Claritin D or six 24-dose boxes of Sudafed.

Missouri and Illinois then passed laws authorizing only licensed pharmacies to sell the products. Anyone buying pseudoephedrine products had to show ID and sign paper logs kept at pharmacy counters.

Elected leaders from both states touted the laws as the panacea to the mom-and-pop meth labs — and the laws did help. From 2005 through 2007, Missouri's lab totals were nearly halved. Illinois' dropped about 60 percent.

But Missouri still ended 2007 with 1,189 busts — more than double any other state's. Illinois was fourth with 342.

Higginbotham said the new laws initially confused pill shoppers, commonly called "smurfers," who buy for meth makers. But they've adapted.

"They just go from store to store to buy pills," he said.

Jefferson County found 218 meth labs last year — the most in Missouri, and more than 27 states combined.

"For anyone who doesn't believe meth is still around, saddle up and ride with us," said Cpl. David Curtis, who succeeded Higginbotham as head of the drug unit. "We'll show you."

Sheriff Oliver "Glenn" Boyer doesn't believe that the meth problem is worse there, just that his department focuses on finding labs. But even with eight detectives assigned to hunt meth labs, officers struggle to find time to collect and analyze the log books from the county's 33 pharmacies.

The list is about 21½ months behind and 100 names long.

Detectives say their time is better spent following tips, making undercover buys and impromptu visits to suspected meth makers.

Sometimes tips come too late.

They didn't learn about the Festus lab until it exploded in April 2007.

Prosecutors say Loyd Triplett, 30, had been cooking meth in his basement next to his 11-year-old daughter's bedroom. He burned his arm. His daughter suffered first- and second-degree

burns on her feet and back. His girlfriend, Mary Mack, 28, and three other children escaped unharmed.

Federal charges have been filed against Triplett and Mack. Police later collected purchase logs that showed the couple had bought 67 grams of pseudoephedrine in 26 trips to six stores. They first violated the purchase limit four months before the fire.

Curtis took over the unit two months after the fire, and soon saw others slip through the laws.

In December, officers pulled over a suspicious car and found more than 600 pseudoephedrine pills inside. The driver led drug agents to the lab. During the raid, a pit bull attacked Curtis' second in command, Jerry Williams.

Minutes later, as he wrapped Williams' bloody hand in gauze, Curtis noted that police could have better prepared for the raid had they been able to track pill purchases electronically.

"With a database, we could have been moving on them instead of just hunting," Curtis said.

In St. Louis County, a seven-member drug unit also struggles to find time to pick up logs at the county's 238 pharmacy counters, said Sgt. Tom Murley.

"There is just way too much information and too many pharmacies and not enough guys to go out and get it," Murley said.

Illinois State Police said the same problem existed there.

#### DATABASES DELIVER

Pill lists aren't piling up in Oklahoma anymore.

In October 2006 — when the state had only a seventh of the number of labs found in Missouri — its leaders launched a statewide database that networked its 1,485 pharmacies. The system stops illegal sales at the counter.

"You're basically putting the 'Welcome' mat out for meth cooks to come to your state if you don't have a database," said Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics spokesman Mark Woodward.

Oklahoma state officials directed a \$500,000 federal grant to develop the Internet-based system. Missouri and Illinois receive the same grant, but use it to pay for more officers, technology and other drug enforcement efforts.

Oklahoma officials say the database played a key role in reducing the number of confirmed meth labs by 92 percent since the federal purchasing law was passed.

Kentucky — with a fifth of Missouri's meth labs — is trying a similar approach.

For more than two years, police in Laurel County, Ky., have tested software called MethCheck.

Police detective Brian Lewis sets up watch lists of people, and the system e-mails him if they buy pills. He tracks purchasing patterns of people buying pills within minutes of each other.

The program also comes in handy when they find a lab the old-fashioned way — a tip.

On a cold, rainy day earlier this year, Lewis and the other investigators were visiting addresses flagged by MethCheck when Lewis' cell phone rang.

"Where's it bubblin' at?" Lewis asked the investigator.

Lewis finished the call and turned to the unit: "Pony up. This should be a good one."

At first, the homeowner let officers in, but changed his mind. Lewis raced back to his computer to run the names of the man and his acquaintances. It showed that one had bought pills the day before — just not enough to stop a sale.

The data strengthened the search warrant Lewis needed. Within an hour the squad logged its first meth lab bust of the year.

In the first year of using the program, the number of labs the squad seized more than quadrupled. Using federal and state money, Kentucky plans to spend about \$500,000 to link its 1,290 pharmacies statewide in June.

#### TIRED OF WAITING

Missouri's House and Senate passed similar bills this year to build a system like Oklahoma's. Even if both chambers agree on a program, the money won't be available until next year. Even then, it's unclear when the state's 1,790 pharmacies will be linked.

Illinois lawmakers have yet to consider a statewide database.

But some counties in Missouri and Illinois aren't waiting.

St. Louis County landed a \$12,000 grant this year to install MethCheck at about 45 area pharmacies. Illinois State Police plan to link pharmacies in Madison, Adams and Vermilion counties to a separate database.

Still, police say dedicated meth cooks can defeat databases by driving far enough. Missouri's addicts can go to six neighboring states that lack databases.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., has proposed a federal grant program to help states get databases, but it has yet to be approved.

It's being fought by the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. The group worries about waits at store counters, clerical mistakes in data and clerks' safety in refusing sales to meth addicts.

But Phil Woodward, who runs Oklahoma's Pharmacist's Association, called the drugstore industry's arguments "pretty weak."

"The bottom line is, we've had no trouble with it," he said.

#### PRESCRIPTION POLICY

Oregon officials decided a database wouldn't stop smurfers from shopping in groups or paying people to buy pills, said Rob Bovett, of the Oregon Narcotics Enforcement Association.

So Oregon officials made pseudoephedrine a prescription drug, as it was in the United States before 1976.

In 2004, police there found 472 labs. In 2007, they found 20 — a 95 percent decline, the largest drop of states with large lab totals.

"Smurfers are usually addicts and paranoid," he said. "The idea of going to a dozen doctors to get prescriptions for two or three boxes is beyond the pale."

The National Alliance for Model State Drug Law lauded Oregon's approach. If other states followed, they wouldn't need to spend millions on databases, said Kyle Smith, the director of the federally funded agency.

"Everybody is looking at Oregon's accomplishment with a bit of envy right now," he said.

Representative Roorda is one of them. In 2004, he filed a bill to make pseudoephedrine a prescription drug, but it went nowhere. He refiled the bill April 1.

Opponents say that consumers shouldn't have to visit doctors for allergy and cold medications, and that the move would produce the illusion that pseudoephedrine was unsafe without a prescription.

Roorda isn't convinced.

"What can be more dangerous than having an over-the-counter drug converted into a deadly addictive drug?" said Roorda, a former Jefferson County drug agent.

Oregon officials braced for widespread complaints from consumers — but they never came, Bovett said.

Some found that a call to a doctor sufficed and that insurance picked up prescription costs. Others settled for alternative medications without pseudoephedrine, he said.

Meanwhile, Roorda said, he supports an electronic database for Missouri as a first step.

"It only forces smurfers to be smarter," he said. "They'll come up with other ways to conceal their identities. It's not a solution. It's an inconvenience."

Meanwhile, pill logs continue to pile up on pharmacy counters in Missouri and Illinois.

And police continue to check them — when they can.