

Armed with new data, officials target 'drug-dealing' doctors

By SADIE GURMAN
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The pain clinic tucked into the corner of a low-slung suburban strip mall was an open secret.

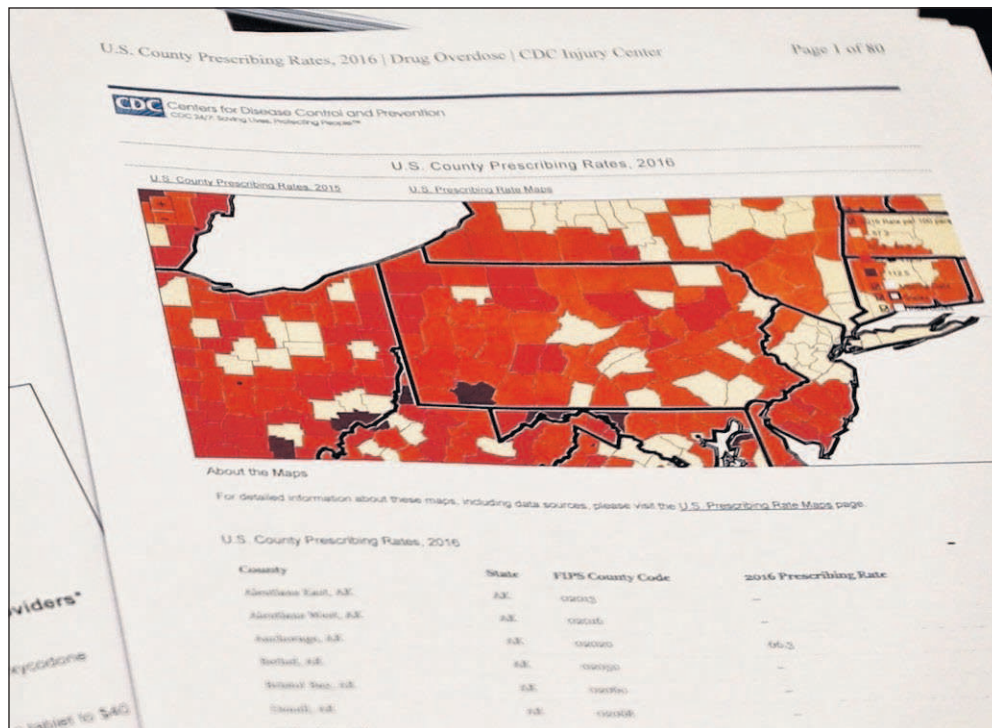
Patients would travel hundreds of miles to see Dr. Andrzej Zielke, eager for what authorities described as a steady flow of prescriptions for the kinds of powerful painkillers that ushered the nation into its worst drug crisis in history.

At least one of Zielke's patients died of an overdose, and prosecutors say others became so dependent on oxycodone and other opioids they would crowd his office, sometimes sleeping in the waiting room. Some peddled their pills near tumble-down storefronts and on blighted street corners in addiction-plagued parts of Allegheny County, where deaths by drug overdose reached record levels last year.

But Robert Cessar, a long-time federal prosecutor, was unaware of Zielke until Justice Department officials handed him a binder of data that, he said, confirmed what pill-seekers from as far away as Ohio and Virginia already knew. The doctor who offered ozone therapy and herbal pain remedies was also prescribing highly addictive narcotics to patients who didn't need them, according to an indictment charging him with conspiracy and unlawfully distributing controlled substances.

Zielke denied he was over-prescribing, telling AP he practiced alternative medicine and many of his patients stopped seeing him when he cut down on pain pills.

His indictment in October was the first by a nationwide group of federal law enforcement officials that, armed with



AP Photo/Keith Srakocic

Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Cessar shows a map illustrating the rates of opioids prescriptions by county during an interview in Pittsburgh. The Justice Department is giving federal prosecutors in 12 regions ravaged by the opioid abuse epidemic a trove of data officials say will help them stop over-prescribing doctors.

new access to a broader array of prescription drug databases, Medicaid and Medicare figures, coroners' records and other numbers compiled by the Justice Department, aims to stop fraudulent doctors faster than before.

The department is providing a trove of data to the Opioid Fraud and Abuse Detection Unit, which draws together authorities in 12 regions across the country, that shows which doctors are prescribing the most, how far patients will travel to see them and whether any have died within 60 days of receiving one of their prescriptions, among other information.

'Shines a light'

Authorities have been going after so-called "pill

mills" for years, but the new approach brings additional federal resources to bear against the escalating epidemic. Where prosecutors would spend months or longer building a case by relying on erratic informants and only limited data, the number-crunching by analysts in Washington, D.C., provides information they say lets them quickly zero in on a region's top opioid prescribers.

"This data shines a light we've never had before," Cessar said. "We don't need to have confidential informants on the street to start a case. Now, we have someone behind a computer screen who is helping us. That has to put (doctors) on notice that we have new tools."

And Rod Rosenstein, deputy attorney general, told AP

the Justice Department will consider going after any lawbreaker, even a pharmaceutical company, as it seeks to bring more cases and reduce the number of unwarranted prescriptions.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions has been in lockstep with President Donald Trump about the need to combat the drug abuse problem that claimed more than 64,000 lives in 2016, a priority that resonates with Trump's working-class supporters who have seen the ravages of drug abuse firsthand. The president called it a public health emergency, a declaration that allows the government to redirect resources in various ways to fight opioid abuse.

But he directed no new federal money to deal with a

scourge that kills nearly 100 people a day, and critics say his efforts fall short of what is needed. The Republican-controlled Congress doesn't seem eager to put extra money toward the problem.

While the effectiveness of the Trump administration's broader strategy remains to be seen, the Justice Department's data-driven effort is one small area where federal prosecutors say they can have an impact.

The data analysis provides clues about who may be breaking the law that are then corroborated with old-fashioned detective work — tips from informants or undercover office visits, said Shawn A. Brokos, a supervisory special agent in the FBI's Pittsburgh division. Investigators can also get a sense of where displaced patients will turn next.

Authorities acknowledge there are legitimate reasons for some doctors to prescribe large quantities of opioids, and high prescribing alone doesn't necessarily trigger extra scrutiny. What raises red flags for investigators are the dentists, psychiatrists and gynecologists who are prescribing at surprisingly high rates.

The effort operates on the long-held perception that drug addiction often starts with prescriptions from doctors and leads to abuse of more dangerous black market drugs like fentanyl, which, for the first time last year, contributed to more overdose deaths than any other legal or illegal drug, surpassing pain pills and heroin.

But that focus can cause law-abiding physicians to abandon disabled patients who rely on prescriptions, for fear of being shut down, said University of Alabama addiction researcher Stefan Kertesz. Those patients will turn to

harder street drugs or even kill themselves, he said.

"The professional risk for physicians is so high that the natural tendency is to get out of the business of prescription opioids at all," he said.

Another addiction expert, Dr. Andrew Kolodny, founder of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing, said prosecutors' emphasis on "drug-dealing doctors" is appropriate but inadequate on its own.

"It's just not really going to have that much of an impact on an epidemic," he said. The bigger change will come from a stronger push for prevention and treatment, he said. And, he added, "They should go after the bigger fish ... the legal narcotics distributors and wholesalers who have literally been getting away with mass manslaughter."

\$250 a visit

Investigators said Zielke charged \$250 a visit and made patients pay in cash. But Zielke said prosecutors unfairly targeted him. Instead of more prosecutions, he said, the government "should promote more alternative therapies," he said. "And they should find out why so many people have pain."

A second indictment by the anti-fraud unit involved a cardiologist in Elko, Nevada, accused of routinely providing patients fentanyl and other painkillers they did not need. Justice officials hope to expand the data-driven work nationwide.

Will it work? As Soo Song, who watched addiction warp communities while serving as acting U.S. attorney in western Pennsylvania, put it: "The best measure of success will be if fewer people die."

Keeth: Memorial set for Saturday at Camp Rilea

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Pacific National Monument, told The Oregonian earlier this year there are likely fewer than 2,000 Pearl Harbor survivors left.

Keeth joined the Army at 16 and was stationed at Schofield Barracks in Honolulu. He was on kitchen duty at the time of the attack on Dec. 7, 1941.

"He went out to dump potato peelings, and he heard unexpected sounds of planes," Barnett said. "Then he looked up, and saw the rising sun on the planes."

Her father didn't talk about the attack much, she said, besides that he watched several of his friends die. Keeth served in the Pacific during World War II, including battles at Guadalcanal and in the Solomon Islands. In a 1944 interview with the Yakima Herald, Keeth described surviving nearby shell explosions, a 19-day siege and being shot at and missed from 3 yards away.

"He could have touched me with his rifle," Keeth told the newspaper of his run-in with the Japanese soldier. "I don't know how he happened to miss."

After the war, Keeth married Ruby, and the couple had four children and nine grandchildren. Most of the family still resides in Yakima Valley, Barnett said. Keeth attended Perry Trade School and learned to be a mechanic who specialized in bodies and fenders.

"Dad was so handy," Barnett said, describing her

father taking apart a surplus house at Fort Vancouver, Washington, and reassembling it as the family home in Wapato. "He self-taught himself to do everything."

Keeth strung together jobs picking fruit, baking and working at local automotive shops before spending 30 years as the shop foreman servicing vehicles on the federal Wapato Irrigation Project in the Yakima Valley. After retiring, Keeth volunteered at local parks and drove buses part time for the school district and fruit farmers.

Ruby Keeth cared for her husband until falling and breaking her hip, after which he moved to Hammond. Keeth was quickly embraced by local veterans and other volunteer organizations, who outfitted Barnett's house with ramps for Keeth's wheelchair and a specialized shower. He became especially popular at Camp Rilea Armed Forces Training Center, where he once visited for a doctor's appointment and ended up having lunch with an entire troop.

"There were so many people wanting to meet him," Barnett said. "Some grown men, my age, would walk away crying. He would remind them of someone in their family. They'd be so touched by meeting dad."

"At the end, they all said, 'Thank you Mr. Keeth for joining us today.' Camp Rilea was just amazing to dad."

A memorial for Keeth will be held Saturday at Camp Rilea.



The Daily Astorian

Local brewers and distillers will reap some of the savings in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act recently passed by Congress.

Tax plan: 'Long overdue for the spirit industry'

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Most Oregon-based breweries fall well under the threshold of the tax cut. Fort George Brewery, the largest in Clatsop County, sold fewer than 14,000 barrels in the state last year, according to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission. Jack Harris, co-owner of Fort George, said the tax cut for craft brewers has been a long time coming.

"That was good news that it passed, but unfortunate that it passed with so many other controversial issues," Harris said.

Bob Pease, CEO of the

Brewers Association in Boulder, Colorado, representing small and independent craft brewers, said he has been working on cutting barrel excise taxes for nearly a decade.

"It's significant, because the current (excise tax) rate has been in place since 1976," he said. "Our belief is that breweries will take the savings and reinvest them in their businesses."

The association would have liked the alcohol legislation to be passed on its own but were told that was unrealistic, Pease said.

Lawrence Cary, co-owner

of Pilot House Distilling, said the reduction in liquor taxes will help with his company's expansion.

"It's long overdue for the spirit industry," Cary said, adding he'd like keep his opinions on the overall tax plan to himself. "With this, you might see a little boom in our production."

Wyden, a co-chairman of the Senate Bipartisan Small Brewers Caucus, introduced the Craft Beverage Modernization and Tax Reform Act in 2015 to reduce taxes and compliance rules for brewers, ciders, vintners and distillers. The bill was a combination of

previously attempted legislation to help the industries and had broad, bipartisan support.

The Los Angeles Times reported that including provisions of the bill in the tax plan was part of an unsuccessful effort by Republicans to curry Wyden's favor and vote. Wyden spokesman Hank Stern told Willamette Week the effort was a non-starter. Wyden and other Senate Democrats opposed the tax plan.

"Senator Wyden was and is proud to lead the fight against a bill that showers corporations with goodies and raises taxes on over half of the middle class," Stern said.

Fryberger: Background includes jobs in nonprofits, database management

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Oceanside, near Tillamook, but for a while she thought Hood River would become her next home. Those plans changed and, after some test visits, she made the leap to Astoria.

She brought a tech job with

her, but she hoped to land a local job, she says in database management. The search proved to be harder than she'd expected. She landed at Coast Community Radio as a volunteer. When former membership specialist J.D. Wells announced he would be leav-

ing the job for health reasons, Joanne Rideout, the former station manager who transitioned to a news director role in November, suddenly had an opening on the station's small staff. Fryberger got the job.

"We take it quite seriously when we hire someone,

because we are a small group and work closely together," Rideout said. She considers Fryberger to be part of a "wonderful renaissance" at the station.

"(Fryberger) is smart, wise, efficient and full of new, great ideas," Rideout

said. "In the short time she's been with us, she's made great strides in raising revenue and strengthening connections to our members. But, best of all, she's a delightful co-worker — a great person to spend time with. She's a terrific addition to our team."

For Fryberger, whose background includes diverse jobs in nonprofits, database management, bookstores, event production and tech, the station is the community hub she was looking for. And forget Hawaii, she says, Astoria is her paradise.