

# Tennessee ranks 2nd in nation for prescription drug abuse

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. -

According to the Tennessee Medical Association, Tennessee ranks second per capita in the nation for prescription drug abuse.

Nashville's News 2 Investigates went undercover with the 21st Judicial Drug Task Force to learn more about the issue.

"It's an epidemic in Tennessee," an agent said.

In our state, doctor shopping, pill mills and over prescribing is rampant, yet somewhat hidden from the public eye.

"Doctor shopping is where one person visits multiple doctors and obtains the same or similar medications," the agent explained. "They are professional drug dealers, in some instances."

Doctor Corely Slovis said that he thinks there are two groups of people when it comes to physicians.

"Caring and honest physicians, and nurse practitioners, who are trying to do good by someone in pain. That is our job, to relieve pain. But the other group of health care practitioners are helping to abuse the system for their own personal profit," he elaborated.

Slovis went on to say that pain pills are not that different from drugs like cocaine in terms of cleanliness and abuse.

"It's clean. It's pure. It's from the doctor. It's from the pharmacist. It's from the corner store," he said.

The task force agent said that he has received numerous complaints from pharmacists about the Williamson County Pain Clinic.

"[The clinic is] often referred to by some as a 'pill mill'," he added.

When Nashville's News 2 Investigates arrived with the task force, eight out of 11 cars in the parking lot were from outside of Williamson County, something the agent said raises a red flag.

"It's interesting that a person would travel from Nashville or Dickson to see a physician. You have to ask yourself, how far or how many practices that person passed to come here?" the agent asked.

The drug task force also receives calls regarding a pain clinic in Nashville. The agent said the calls are about the quantity of medication and people coming out of their office.

Outside of the clinic, the parking lot is full of activity that usually doesn't occur at a normal doctor's office,



such as people loitering and patients chatting with each other through their car windows.

"These people network. These people talk about which pharmacies fill prescriptions, which pharmacies won't," the agent explained.

Nashville's News 2 Investigates noted that the only sign at the pain facility is a plywood board leaning against a wall.

One car that was noticed in the parking lot was from Cocke County, some 240 miles away.

The car had four people inside who were at the clinic for over two hours, biding their time by smoking in the parking lot and talking to others in nearby cars.

Nashville's News 2 Investigates along with the drug task force agent followed the car to a store down the road.

Nashville's News 2 asked the driver why they are coming to an "alleged pill mill" from Cocke County.

The driver and one of the passengers both say they are "just giving a friend a ride" and noted that they "don't even go to that doctor".

Nashville's News 2 Investigates, with help of the drug task force agent, ran the license plate on the owner of the Cocke County car.

He has had six arrests in his past with a history of run-ins with the law dating back seven years with charges ranging from multiple DUIs, driving without a license and a drug violation.

This is the record for only one man in one car that drug agents say is highly suspicious in the seedy world of doctor shopping.

Tennessee does have some measures in place to combat the problem.

One of those is the controlled substance monitoring database, which mandates that physicians check a patient's drug history.

The database was suggested for years and became law this April. Physicians who do not comply can be subject to civil sanctions or penalties assessed by the healthcare provider's licensing board.

Surprisingly, the State Department of Health has no record of the pain clinic that Nashville's News 2 Investigates and drug task force agents surveilled.

Officials with the health department said they are aware of a practice by the same name but that it is located in another part of town and not the address where Nashville's News 2 Investigates watched patients come and go for hours.

Neither of the two pain clinics, or the doctors who run them, have any violations registered with the state.

"That's because nobody has put enough pressure on them yet," the agent said.

Doctor shopping was once a felony, but now those convicted only receive misdemeanors unless their offense is associated directly with TennCare fraud.